

A KEN HOLT Mystery

THE MYSTERY OF THE INVISIBLE ENEMY

The illustration depicts two young men in a dark, industrial environment filled with pipes and machinery. One man, with reddish hair and wearing a light-colored button-down shirt and brown trousers, stands and looks on with a concerned expression. The other man, with dark hair and wearing a red sweater vest over a light shirt and blue trousers, is kneeling and focused on adjusting a wire or component on a piece of equipment. The overall tone is mysterious and technical.

By BRUCE CAMPBELL

THE MYSTERY OF THE INVISIBLE ENEMY
A KEN HOLT Mystery, No. 14
By Bruce Campbell

The KEN HOLT Mystery Stories

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CHAPTER I

JOB OFFER

At eight o'clock Tuesday evening five of the six desks in the office of the *Brentwood Advance* were occupied, and four typewriters were clattering at once. The only person not busy tapping out a story was equally busy stowing film holders, flash apparatus, and other pieces of equipment into a black leather camera case.

"Nice, safe, dull job tonight," he muttered to his friend. "Quite a comedown for those daring marine detectives, Holt and Allen."

Ken Holt looked up at the speaker, towering, redheaded Sandy Allen. Sandy's words had recalled a recent adventure which had led both boys into grave peril on the high seas-an adventure which had been tagged in the press as *The Mystery of the Shattered Glass*.

"Are you complaining?" Ken asked, grinning. "I know the food on that ship was good, but I've heard this Halloween affair we're covering tonight always has the best party refreshments in town."

From behind a cluttered desk, bearing a small sign reading *Society Editor*, a woman's voice joined the conversation. "When it comes to food," Maribelle Clewes said, winking at Ken, "you know perfectly well it's quantity that Sandy's interested in-not quality."

"Ha!" Sandy said, stuffing more objects into his already bulging case. "Is that the gratitude I get for having spent the best years of my life photographing Brentwood's scintillating social soirees, just to make you happy? By actual count I have taken twenty-nine thousand pictures of brides, fourteen thousand shots of newly appointed committees-" He stopped and shrugged. "But why go on? There are those who will never appreciate my work, no matter how I slave."

Pop Allen, owner and editor of the *Advance*, glared over his typewriter at Sandy and then spoke to the man at the desk adjoining his own. "You know, Bert," he said, "if our staff could write-and take pictures-as well as it talks, we'd have the best newspaper east of the Rockies."

Bert answered without looking up from his flying fingers. "That's what we've got now, Pop." Like his younger brother Sandy, he had his father's better than six-foot height and the flaming red hair that was a trade-mark of all the Allens except tiny Mom Allen.

Maribelle Clewes was looking for something in her purse. The purse was blue, which meant that this was Maribelle's "blue day"-that the gray-haired society editor's coat, hat, and shoes were the same

shade. "I hope nobody is implying that the social notes of the *Advance* are not the best ones east of the Rockies," she said. The dimples in her plump cheeks contradicted the haughty note in her voice. "Why, half our readers buy the *Advance* for its social page alone."

"And the second half," Sandy said, just as loftily, "buys it for its superb photographs."

Ken Holt had just pulled a sheet of paper out of his typewriter. Now, having read it through swiftly, he got up and started toward Pop Allen's battered corner desk which overlooked the whole room. When Ken stood next to any of the three towering Allens, he appeared almost frail. His slender figure was almost four inches short of Sandy's height, but it had a steellike endurance. And the brain under Ken's black hair, as Sandy had been known to remark, could work faster than a calculating machine. "I agree with both of you," Ken told Maribelle and Sandy. "And the third half of our readers, of course, buys--"

"Our staff," Pop cut in, addressing Bert in a pained tone, "is as outstanding for its mathematical skill as it is for its time-wasting ability."

Sandy closed his camera case and snapped the catches shut. "Come on," he said to Ken and Maribelle. "We are not properly appreciated around here. Let's take our abilities-and my appetite-to the annual Halloween party of the Brentwood Foundry and Casting Company. I am beginning to hunger for some of those refreshments that you spoke so highly of, Ken."

"I'm more hungry," Pop said, "for a good long story and some lively pictures out of this assignment. And remember, Bert will be going up to that plant pretty soon now, to start work on the big special edition we're getting out for the company's tenth anniversary. So keep your ears open for anything he might want to use, and don't be afraid to take some extra pictures-we'll be needing plenty. Talk to Lew Collins, and to Robert Jennings if he's there and--"

"But don't," Bert interrupted, "mess things up for me by putting your foot in it about their big fuss."

Ken and Sandy, halfway to the door where Maribelle was already waiting for them, stopped. "Fuss?" Ken repeated. "What fuss?"

"Surely you remember the big quarrel," Bert began, "that originally started when--"

It was Maribelle's turn to interrupt. "They were in Europe last year when the final blowup happened," she reminded Bert. "Come on," she told the boys. "I can tell you all about it on the way."

"Good." Pop nodded at them. "Do that, Maribelle. There's been enough ill feeling over the company's problems. We don't want to stir up any more by letting a couple of ignorant young reporters loose at

the party tonight.”

“Ignorant he calls us!” Sandy muttered. But Maribelle had gripped his arm, and with Ken on her other side, she swept them both out into the chilly October night.

“It was like this,” Maribelle said, settling down between them as Sandy started the motor of the boys’ convertible.

“Don’t leave anything out now,” Ken said. He and Sandy laughed, and Maribelle raised her chin haughtily, trying to look as if her feelings were hurt. Maribelle’s phenomenal memory, which always retained enough details to turn every incident into an hour-long story, was a perpetual excuse for teasing her around the office. But Maribelle knew, as Ken and the Allens did too, that her memory was also one of the most valuable assets the *Advance* possessed.

“I will try not to omit anything important,” Maribelle said primly. Then she grinned her cheerful grin. “How far back do I have to go? Do you two know how that factory got started?”

“Oh, sure,” Sandy told her quickly. “You can skip that. It belonged to some other company first, and then-“

” ‘Some other company,’” Maribelle mimicked. “It’s a good thing you can focus your camera better than you can your mind, Sandy. It belonged to the Albourn Iron and Steel Corporation. It was one of the smaller factories in a big chain Albourn owned. But about eleven years ago the Albourn management decided that the Brentwood plant was too old and inefficient to keep in operation, so they just pulled out- abandoned the plant. Good business for Albourn, I suppose, but absolute tragedy for about a hundred and fifty families in Brentwood.”

“Until Lew Collins decided to try opening up the plant on Brentwood money,” Sandy chimed in. “Now I remember it all, Maribelle.”

“You should,” Maribelle told him. “Your father helped make the whole thing possible. But Ken wasn’t here then-were you, Ken? So you didn’t read all about it at the time.”

“No, Maribelle,” Ken agreed, smiling.

Sandy, pulling up at a stop light in the center of town, cast him a disgusted look. “Do you always have to tell the truth? Now we’ll have to hear about the whole eleven years!”

“If I wasn’t interrupted,” Maribelle told him unsympathetically, “I could give you a quick run down in about two minutes. Lew Collins had been the plant manager for Albourn,” she went on, “and Albourn offered him a job at one of their other plants when the Brentwood place shut down. But he decided to stay here and see what he could do with the old plant if he could put all those workers back on the job again. He convinced a small group of people in Brentwood -Pop Allen was one of them, and I was another-to invest in the new Brentwood

Foundry and Casting Company. With what he could borrow from the bank, it was enough to buy up the old building and equipment, and Lew got the place in operation. Of course it was a tough pull. He couldn't go after the sort of big orders Alborn used to fill, but he landed some small casting orders-stuff that a big company wouldn't bother with. And pretty soon, just because Lew handled everything so well, the business began to grow. He suggested that we sell more shares, so that he could enlarge the plant and get some new equipment, and we all voted to go along with him. A lot of employees bought stock-those who could afford it. But at the same time some of Brentwood's most important businessmen-Bob Jennings, for example, the real-estate and insurance man-bought into the company too. *After,*" Maribelle added significantly, "Lew had taken most of the risk."

Suddenly the name of Lew Collins clicked in Ken's mind. He hadn't recognized it before, because it had been as "Mr. Lew" that Ken had heard of him from the boys on the east side of Brentwood who spent their summers on the baseball diamond laid out on a vacant lot which Collins owned next to his own home. "Mr. Lew" was both hero and umpire for half a dozen teams of youngsters who would otherwise have had no place in the neighborhood to play. Ken understood, now, the note of affectionate admiration in Maribelle's voice whenever she mentioned the man's name.

He had missed a few words of Maribelle's story.

"... so with the new machinery and the new wing on the building," Maribelle was saying, "things began to hum. Lew could compete for bigger orders by then, and he got them too-sometimes right out from under the noses of the really large outfits. And that included Alborn. And the first thing we knew, Alborn was offering to buy the plant back again! That's when the trouble started!"

Ken, startled by Maribelle's last words, said, "Trouble! But why should it start then, when the plant was really on its feet?"

"Because Jennings and his group-all latecomers in the business," Maribelle said scornfully, "wanted to sell to Alborn. All they cared about was making a big profit on their investment. The rest of us stockholders, of course, wouldn't even consider selling unless Alborn guaranteed to keep the plant open-which it wouldn't do. This happened about two years ago, and it was a knockdown, drag-out fight. Jennings was beaten. And he didn't like it one little bit!"

Sandy turned the car off the highway, drove through an open gate in a fence enclosing the factory property, and into a crowded parking lot. Before them, its windows bright yellow against the night, lay the squat factory building of the Brentwood Foundry and Casting Company.

“And there’s still bad feeling over that fight, and that’s what we’re not supposed to talk about-right?” Ken asked. “But I thought something was said about ‘last year.’ And you just said this fight took place two years ago.”

“I haven’t finished,” Maribelle told him briskly.

“What happened after that was that Albourn tried to force Lew out of business-or, at least, into near bankruptcy, so that he’d either sell or give up. Albourn began to underbid us-Lew, that is-on every job available, even on small orders, the kind they wouldn’t have touched before. Of course it cost them money, but they had it to lose. We didn’t. The plant began to go downhill fast. Jennings called a special stockholders’ meeting-he’d got himself elected president of the board of directors-to try to force Lew out. That’s what happened last year when you boys were away.

“And it was at that meeting,” Maribelle said triumphantly, “that Lew told the stockholders he’d been playing with the idea of an entirely new type of casting machine, and that he thought he could perfect it if he had a little more time. If it turned out to be as good as he hoped it would, the plant would really go places. We voted to back him. But it was a mighty close fight, with all the Jennings crowd insisting that we should sell to Albourn while we could. And Lew even persuaded the bank to give the plant a loan to help keep it going while he and a couple of bright young engineers at the place tried to complete the new machine.

“Of course I don’t know anything about the machine itself,” she added. “I wouldn’t understand it even if I saw it, probably, but I haven’t seen it. Nobody has-not even Bob Jennings. It’s all being kept very secret until it’s completed and patented. I just know it’s supposed to turn out small castings in practically no time, and with such precision that they won’t even need polishing. It sounds mysterious to me. But if Lew Collins says he can make such a machine, I’m sure he can.” Maribelle started to search purse and pockets for her gloves as Sandy turned the motor off.

“So we don’t bring up as subjects for party chitchat,” Sandy said, “the possibility of selling to Albourn, or the plant going bankrupt, and other allied matters.”

“That’s right,” Maribelle agreed. “Especially if Jennings is at the party. But he probably won’t be. He doesn’t bother dropping in at the plant unless he wants to complain about something.”

Ken had one hand on the door handle, but he didn’t get out.

“When is the machine supposed to be finished? Has Mr. Collins set a date for that yet?”

Maribelle shook her head. “He can’t promise anything, of course. But I’ve heard he hopes to have some sort of announcement by next

month.”

“Hmm!” Now Sandy sounded interested too. “In time for the tenth birthday. No wonder Pop is planning a big anniversary issue.”

“It’ll make a good ending to the story,” Ken said thoughtfully.

“Wonderful!” Maribelle breathed.

“And then everybody can live happily ever after,” Sandy said. “Except the big bad Albourn wolf and the mean old fox Jennings.”

Maribelle giggled. “I don’t have very kind feelings toward Bob Jennings, do I? But he has been mean-just plain mean!”

It was clear, even before they opened the door to the building, that the party was in full swing. Waves of music, laughter, and conversation engulfed them as they stepped into the entrance corridor, and grew louder as they approached the large double door opening into the room where the party was being held.

Inside the large room, dancing couples made a bright kaleidoscope of color under gay lights. They were all in costume, according to the tradition that had sprung up the first year Lew Collins reopened the plant. It was a family party. There were youngsters among the dancers, and small children fighting off sleepiness in the laps of their mothers, seated in chairs along two sides of the room. Opposite the wide doorway was the bandstand, where an orchestra of high school boys was making amazingly good music. And on either side of the doorway were long tables laden with an equally amazing variety of food. The wives and daughters of the men who worked at the plant, along with the women employees, provided the feast for their annual party. That tradition too belonged to the first year of the plant’s reopening, when the first Halloween party had been planned to honor the man who had given up a secure job with Albourn to try to bring an abandoned factory back to life again.

Suddenly a tall, youthful-looking figure in a sober business suit, with a frivolous paper hat perched on his straw-colored hair, appeared out of the crowd. He grabbed at the hat with one hand and extended the other to Maribelle. “You’re Miss Clewes, aren’t you? I’m sure I’ve seen you at stockholders’ meetings or somewhere.”

“Or somewhere,” Maribelle agreed, smiling. “And you’re Mr. Bascom.” She introduced the boys and then said, “But, Mr. Bascom, why aren’t you in costume?” Her gesture took in the dancing clowns, cowboys, witches, ballerinas, and knights in cardboard armor shiny with aluminum paint. “I thought Mr. Collins was the only one admitted to these parties in street clothes-and Mr. Jennings, of course,” she added. “Is he here tonight?”

“I haven’t seen Mr. Jennings,” Bascom answered. “Probably this sort of party seems pretty childish to him.”

Maribelle’s nose twitched. “Probably,” she said. And then she

smiled. "And is that why you're not dressed up-because it seems childish to you too?"

Bascom laughed. "To tell you the truth, I think I'd make a terrific Indian chief." Then he sobered. "No, I'm a safety measure, really. If a fuse gets blown, or some other catastrophe occurs, I'm more visible this way-people can find me and send me trouble shooting. My title building superintendent sounds fine, but everybody knows I'm really sort of handy man, and sometimes janitor." He smiled again.

"Now, what can I do for you people? Naturally we don't have a press relations man in a plant this size, but maybe I can answer any questions you've got."

"I'm sure you can. And my first question is: Where can we put our coats? Sandy will be taking pictures, you know," Maribelle explained to their volunteer host, "and Ken and I will be just wandering around taking notes and finding out what goes on. So if we could just get rid of these first--"

"Of course," Bascom said. "Come along and leave your coats in my office. Then you won't have to struggle through that great pile of them out in the hall when you're ready to leave."

"Let me take yours, Maribelle," Ken suggested. "No sense in all of us going."

A moment later the boys followed Bascom down the hall that stretched back from the entrance. The man stopped before a door on which his name was neatly lettered and was reaching for the knob when a door across the hall burst open.

The angry words that struck the boys' ears were spoken by a thin, dark man below medium height.

"... my way this time," he was saying, speaking over his shoulder as he emerged into the hall, "if we expect to--"

Suddenly the speaker seemed to become aware that he was being overheard. He stopped short, brought his head around with a snap, and glared at Bascom and the boys for a moment out of hard gray eyes. Then he smiled thinly, nodded to Bascom, said a sharp "Good night!" over his shoulder, and strode stiffly down the hall toward the front of the building.

Bascom rattled the knob of his door more noisily than was necessary and reached around the jamb to flick on a light. He was hastily gesturing the boys inside when another figure emerged through the still-open door opposite. Ken recognized him immediately, though the only picture of Lew Collins he had ever seen showed the big heavy-set figure in wrinkled slacks and T shirt, the broad face smiling under one of the baseball caps like those he had bought for his teams.

"Good evening, Mr. Collins," Bascom said uneasily, as if not sure

the man wanted to be addressed.

Low Collins wasn't smiling now. "Evening," he said. His voice sounded tired. Then he looked at Sandy for a moment, and suddenly a grin wiped the tiredness briefly from his face. "You're an Allen," he said. "I'd recognize that hair anywhere." His big hand went out toward Sandy, and his eyes moved to Ken.

"That's right," Sandy told him. "I'm Sandy-the younger one, that is. And this is Ken Holt."

"Ah, yes-Holt and Allen." Collins shook Ken's hand and went on talking. "You know, I was talking to Pop Allen in the *Advance* office that day last summer when he got the first call from New York about that mess you two got into on that freighter-into and out of, I ought to add. That was quite a job you two did-quite a job." He looked from one to the other of them, and smiled again, but Ken had the feeling that the man wasn't seeing them any longer. He was already turning away when he looked back and said, "You'll have to excuse me now, I'm afraid. I'm glad to have met you both. Will you please see that they get any help they need, Bascom?"

"Certainly, Mr. Collins."

Then Bascom ushered the boys into his room without further interruption.

Ken asked a question to which he was quite certain he already knew the answer. "Was that Mr. Jennings-the man who left Mr. Collins' room a minute ago?"

"Yes," Bascom said stiffly. He didn't offer any comment on the angry words Jennings had spoken at the moment of his departure.

Carefully Ken and Sandy avoided each other's glances as Bascom found a hanger for Maribelle's coat.

"I hope you two enjoy good food," Bascom said a moment later, as if eager to get the conversation on a safe subject. "I haven't had a chance at the buffet yet myself, but I hear that Mrs. Krepski's chicken salad is something special."

Sandy grinned. "It always is," he said. "And isn't there supposed to be a Billings' chocolate cake here too?"

Bascom laughed. "I don't know about that one. But there's a Billings in our accounting department, so there ought to be a good chance of it."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Sandy asked.

It was ten o'clock when the prizes for the best costumes were finally awarded, and Sandy could get his pictures of the winners. That took a little time, because the first prize had been divided among seven men dressed alike to represent the Seven Dwarfs. Bascom, helping Ken to list the names, said, grinning, "You'd think they were a bunch of kids, wouldn't you? But actually they're the heads of our

various departments, and a couple of young engineers who work with Mr. Collins."

"They seem to be having a fine time," Ken said. "In fact, this seems like a fine party altogether."

Maribelle had completed her notes by the time Ken and Sandy had the pictures and their identifications completed, and announced that she was ready to go home. The boys were willing to leave too. So they got their coats and made their way through the crowd once more-with one last hasty pause on Sandy's part at the buffet table. After delivering Maribelle to her home they went to the office to develop Sandy's negatives. Ken got his notes in order and had his section of the story well under way before Sandy came up from his basement darkroom.

"I'm tired," Sandy said. "Can't you finish that tomorrow?"

"I should think you would be," Ken told him. "Lifting all that heavy food up to your mouth, time after time."

"It was not heavy," Sandy said indignantly. "On behalf of Mrs. Billings and-"

"All right," Ken said, grinning, "Let's go home."

He had been calling the Allen house home for quite a while now-ever since that time when a terrified Ken Holt, knowing only that his father was in desperate trouble and that he could do nothing alone to help him, had stumbled into the *Advance* office and found himself suddenly blessed with three friends. When Mom Allen became his friend too and insisted that motherless Ken move in with the Allens, both he and his foreign-correspondent father knew it was the finest thing that had ever happened to them.

Now, whenever he was in the United States, Richard Holt, Ken's father, thought of the Allen house as home too. Neither of them could speak of going "home" to the Allens without being grateful for their luck.

A few minutes later, as the two boys walked from the driveway toward the kitchen door, Sandy said, "Either Bert's raiding the refrigerator right now, or he forgot to turn off the kitchen lights after finishing the rest of the pie."

"Don't jump to conclusions," Ken retorted. "A light in the kitchen could mean several things. Maybe Pop is finishing the pie, for example, or maybe-"

He was pushing the kitchen door open as he spoke and Pop's voice interrupted him.

"That you, boys?"

"Right again, mastermind," Sandy said to Ken under his breath. "It's us!" he called. "And what Mom is going to say when she finds you've-" He broke off as he realized that Pop wasn't alone.

Ken, swallowing his surprise, said, "Good evening, Mr. Collins."

Lew Collins, he thought, looked even more tired than he had earlier-or more worried, perhaps. The big man smiled up at them from the kitchen chair where he sat slumped over a cup of Pop's strong coffee.

Sandy tried to cover his own surprise with words. "Can't Pop give you more than coffee, sir? That's pretty poor pickings, compared with the food at your party tonight."

Pop spoke without looking up at them. "Sit down, you two," he said quietly. "Lew's been waiting to talk to you."

"To us?" Sandy stared blankly at his father.

"Sit down, I said." Pop's voice sounded unusually serious. He waited only until the boys pulled up two more chairs and sat down. "This is Lew's story," he said then, "but I'll start it for him. Someone has managed to photograph the plans of his new machine. He got a letter today demanding a hundred thousand dollars for the negatives. If he doesn't pay up-the letter says-copies of the plans will be sent to every important foundry in this country and abroad too. But he can't pay up. The company just doesn't have that kind of money. It could mean the end of the plant in Brentwood-unless those negatives can be recovered. He wants you two to try to do that."

CHAPTER II

LOCKED-ROOM PUZZLE

"He wants us?" Sandy croaked.

"What did you say, Pop?" Ken looked at Pop Allen, then at the slumped figure of Lew Collins, and back at Pop again.

But it was Lew Collins who answered him. He pulled himself up straight in his chair and for a moment a tired smile shifted the lines in his weary face. "He said just what you think he said," he told the boys. "I'd like you to see if you can't get those negatives back from the-the-" His mouth tightened for a moment over words he wouldn't let himself say. When he spoke again, it was to start a new sentence. "I told you I knew about that freighter mystery you two solved last year," he said. "Remembering that was what gave me the idea. I figure if you could do that, you might be able to do this too-and save the plant for us."

The second hand of the kitchen clock made half a revolution before anyone spoke again.

Then Ken said slowly, "But we fell into that business on the freighter, Mr. Collins. I mean, we were there when it happened. We were right in the middle of it. But this-" He shook his head, still trying to take in the full significance of what Pop and Mr. Collins had said. "If I've understood you correctly, this is outright extortion, sir. And you don't want a couple of amateurs like us bumping into it. You want the police-trained investigators-somebody who-"

Collins had pulled a pipe out of his pocket and was groping for tobacco. Silently Pop thrust out his own oilskin pouch and Collins accepted it without thanks. This absent-minded gesture told Ken, better than words, how disturbed this big quiet man was.

"You're wrong, Ken," Collins said quietly. "The last thing we want is the kind of trained help you're suggesting." He was pulling a paper out of his pocket as he spoke and he thrust it across the table toward the boys. "Read this and you'll understand why I say that."

Ken's hands hovered over the paper-a sheet about the size of ordinary typing paper, but thicker and rougher. It had been folded three times in business-letter fashion. "There may be fingerprints on it. That's the sort of thing I meant about-"

Collins' tired voice interrupted him. "Don't worry about that. When you read the letter you'll see our extortionist is too smart to leave his fingerprints as a clue."

Ken's eyes met Sandy's for one unhappy moment. Sandy looked as disturbed as Ken himself felt. Then Ken flattened the paper on the

table. Sandy leaned over his shoulder as they read the neatly typed lines together:

Dear Mr. Collins:

Enclosed is a photograph of a section of one of the master plans of your new automatic casting machine. I am sure you will recognize it as being genuine. I also have photographs of other drawings-enough, I'm sure, to give any of your competitors sufficient data to construct a machine like the one you are now completing. If one of them did construct such a machine, I know, of course, that your company could go to court and-eventually-prove the validity of your claim to the design. But I also know, as I'm sure you do too, that your company has neither the funds for a long court fight, nor the time to indulge in such a measure. In fact-and this too is something you and your stockholders know only too well-the only reason your company exists at all at this moment is because of the money you were able to borrow on the strength of this new equipment. If it should become known that you have no monopoly on your invention, your credit would vanish; the bank would demand immediate repayment of its loan and your company would be forced into bankruptcy.

As an alternative to this disaster I suggest that your company would prefer to purchase the negatives I have in my possession. I will relinquish them to you outright for \$100,000, which I'm sure you'll agree is a reasonable price under the circumstances. If you wish to accept my offer, inform me of your decision by placing the following advertisement in the classified columns of this week's Advance:

Wanted to buy: foundry equipment in first-class condition.

If I do not see the advertisement in this week's Advance, I shall conclude that you do not want to do business with me. In that case I shall proceed to mail photographic copies of the plans in my possession to all the major foundry and casting manufacturers both here and abroad.

I must caution you against employing police or private detectives in an effort to discover my identity. I will know immediately if you take such steps, and at the first sign of an investigation I will send out the plans which are at this moment ready for mailing. I have also made arrangements for having the plans mailed out in the unlikely event of my arrest.

So think it over. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that you could discover my identity, but if you do so, you will bring about the ruin of your company.

One word more: don't bother checking this letter for fingerprints. There are none of mine on it-or on the enclosed picture or on the envelope in which this will be mailed.

The letter was unsigned.

"Jumping Jehoshaphat!" Sandy breathed softly.

Collins had a four-by-five photograph in his hand, and now,

handing it across the table, he said, "This is the picture that came with the letter. And here's the envelope," he added, taking it from his pocket too.

Ken, still feeling dazed, glanced briefly at the envelope. It was of an inexpensive grade-like the paper itself-and could have been purchased in any of a dozen Brentwood stores. The postmark was Brentwood, dated the previous day. With fingers that felt awkward Ken picked up the picture.

It showed what appeared to be a draftsman's drawing of an intricate piece of machinery-intricate enough so that it was meaningless to Ken.

"What is it?" Sandy asked.

Collins smiled faintly. "Cross section of a molten-metal injection valve-if that means anything to you."

Ken blinked. Sandy shook his head.

"It wouldn't," Collins agreed. "But take my word for it-it's one of the most important and most novel parts of our machine."

In the lower right-hand corner of the photograph was a boxed-off area filled with neat figures and letters so small that they were indistinguishable to the naked eye.

"Are you sure this is a photograph of a genuine drawing?" Ken asked.

As if Collins had followed his glance, he said, "Yes-and that stuff in the corner is our own identification of that particular drawing. I've checked the numbers with a magnifying glass. And besides, I'd know the drawing itself anywhere."

Nobody spoke. Pop drew noisily on his pipe.

Ken looked at him. "Don't you think we're right, Pop?" he demanded. "Shouldn't Mr. Collins go to the police? Andy Kane could get experts on this job -and so quietly that no one would know an investigation was under way."

"Could he?" Pop asked. "I know the chief would do anything he could, but-" He broke off and looked at Collins.

"We just can't risk it," Collins said, more decisively than he had spoken so far. "You see-much as I hate to say this-the person who wrote that letter must have some connection with our company. Nobody else would have so much knowledge of it. And if a single policeman turned up at the plant-"

"But Andy Kane wouldn't send a man in uniform," Ken pointed out.

Collins reworded his sentence. "If *any* stranger turned up at the plant, prowling around and asking questions, the man who wrote that letter would know it."

"Even if he looked like a new employee with a legitimate job to

do?" Sandy asked, leaning forward.

Collins smiled briefly. "Definitely. We haven't even been able to keep on all our own regular employees lately. We've been working most of them part time to avoid laying off any more than we have to, while slugging away at this machine. Everybody knows how we're situated. So any stranger ..." He let his voice trail off.

Ken nodded. "Yes. I see." He glanced at Pop, but still the editor of the *Advance* remained silent, as if he were determined not to comment on the problem that occupied all their minds.

"Could you possibly pay the hundred thousand and get the negatives back?" Ken asked desperately. "Then it would be safe to turn this letter over to the police, let them catch the guilty party, and maybe eventually have your money returned."

"We simply don't have it to pay," Collins said slowly. "And the bank has already made it clear that they've advanced us every penny we can expect from them until our machine is finished." He jammed his pipe into his mouth for an instant and then pulled it out again. "Don't think we wouldn't pay up if we could get the money," he said, with the first flash of open anger he had shown. "A hundred thousand is a drop in the bucket compared to what our machine will earn if we can get it into production. But we don't have it. We can't get it. And that's that." Again the pipe went back into his mouth and he puffed on it furiously before jerking it out once more.

"There are just two possibilities, as I see it," he said. "Either you two dig in and discover who this man is, and where those negatives are, before he can make good his threat-or-" he slumped back in his chair -"or we do what Jennings wants us to do."

The last words were so unexpected that Ken swallowed before he could speak. "Then you're not the only one who knows about this? Jennings knows too?" Waiting for Collins' answer he could see again that stiff, angry figure walking away from Collins' office door earlier that night.

"Of course," Collins said quietly. "I had to tell him. He's the chairman of our board of directors. And when I told him I also asked him if his group of stockholders would be willing to lend the company the money to pay this extortion fee. They could. That is, together they could raise that large a sum. The answer was no. Jennings even refused to bring the matter up to them. And he said he'd fight me tooth and nail if I brought up the suggestion myself. Not that he'd have to fight very hard," he added wryly. "His friends on the board would naturally veto any suggestion of mine, if Jennings asked them to."

His tired eyes twinkled briefly at the boys. "I think you heard the end of my discussion with Jennings this evening. He was just leaving

my office after our conference on this matter when you came down the hall."

"We heard a couple of words. He sounded angry," Sandy said.

"He did indeed," Collins told them. "Curiously enough, he took the letter itself more calmly than I had. But he really got angry when I asked him about the possibility of obtaining the money from the group of men who normally vote his way."

"And did he have another suggestion?" Ken asked. "You said something about doing 'what Jennings wants.'"

"Oh, yes." Collins held his pipe up before his face and stared at it intently. "He wants us to approach the Albourn people at once-with the offer to sell them our factory and the rights to the new machine."

"Sell out to Albourn when your machine is almost finished?" For a moment Ken could think only about how this suggestion must appear to Lew Collins, who had fought so long to keep his company in Brentwood hands. Then he said, "But do you mean Jennings would be willing to sell the company now-with this threat hanging over it? Why, when Albourn found out what they'd got into-"

"You misjudge him." Collins' mouth quirked briefly. "No, he'd tell the Albourn people about the spot we're in. He figures that they'd be glad to pay the hundred thousand, plus a purchase price for the plant. And I suspect he's right," Collins added grimly. "Albourn was mighty eager to run us out of business even before they began to hear rumors about our new machine."

"But if Albourn hears about the spot you're in, why should they pay you anything?" Sandy asked abruptly. "If you're going to tell them about this letter-why, they'll just let you sit and suffer, won't they? Because if they don't buy you out, and you can't pay the hundred thousand, the plans for your machine are going to be mailed to every plant in the world. Or so he says." Sandy jabbed at the letter still lying on the table. "So Albourn will get them for nothing, if they just wait."

"Right," Collins agreed wearily. "Albourn will get them-and so will every other plant in the field. And believe me, Albourn would be willing to pay more than a hundred thousand for an exclusive right to this machine-unless I'm dead wrong about what the machine is going to be worth. And I don't think I am." He was silent for a moment and then he added, "Well, I think I've given you the whole story now. Except for the fact that Jennings has called a board meeting for tomorrow morning. He's going to lay the whole problem before the members and ask for a vote empowering him to sell to Albourn. He'll get it too. Even I can see that it will be our only way out, short of bankruptcy."

Pop spoke for the first time after many long minutes. "Unless," he said, "you can get those photographs back."

“Yes,” Collins agreed. “So we’re right where we started. Will you two take a crack at doing that?”

“But it would be crazy, Mr. Collins!” Sandy groaned. “What chance would we have?”

“What chance have we got if you don’t try?” Collins asked.

“But, Mr. Collins,” Ken pointed out, “if you think the man who wrote that letter is somebody in your plant-and I can see he must be-then he’d be alerted even if Sandy and I did start gumshoeing around asking questions. Even if he thinks we’re just a couple of kids, he might feel you had violated his terms-and he says here that he would mail the plans out the minute he knew that *any* kind of investigation was going on.”

“But that’s just the point!” Collins leaned forward urgently. “It won’t look like an investigation if you two are doing it. So far as anybody will know, you’ll be around the plant gathering information for that special issue Pop’s been planning to get out on the company’s anniversary.”

“I see,” Ken said slowly, but he added immediately, “No, it wouldn’t work. Bert’s been slated to do that story. I even noticed a paragraph about it in your shop paper that I picked up last night.”

“Bah!” Pop’s big hand brushed the objection away as if it were a fly. “I’m the editor of this paper. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve shifted assignments. I’ll send Bert down to cover the legislature. We haven’t had an on-the-spot story from there yet this fall.”

“You see?” Collins was still leaning forward, one coat sleeve half in his saucer. “The idea of calling on you for help hit me tonight when I saw you two at the plant. Nobody thought of you as detectives tonight, even though everybody’s heard about the cases you’ve been tangled up in. So why would they think of you as detectives if you showed up again tomorrow, presumably getting background stuff for a story? Why, you could wander around asking questions for days, and it would look as if you were just doing your regular work.”

“But what questions?” Ken asked. “Sure, we’d ask plenty of questions if we were getting ready to write a story. ‘What can you tell me about the early days when Mr. Collins was trying to get the plant reopened?’ That sort of thing, yes. But as soon as we edge up to the subject of the plans, which have been kept secret all this time, the man who wrote that letter would have a pretty good idea of what we were trying to do.”

“Ken’s right, Mr. Collins,” Sandy said unhappily. “It would be too risky. We’d be likely to do you more harm than good.”

Slowly Collins straightened up from the table and then leaned back in his chair. His face looked more tired than ever, and his eyes were sad. “Of course,” he said quietly, “if you feel it’s something you don’t

want to tackle, I suppose I can't--

"It's not that we don't want to, sir," Ken burst out. "It's just that we know we shouldn't. Look! Maybe you don't need anybody. Maybe you can figure out who the culprit is yourself. You know everybody at the plant. You probably know everything anybody else could find out after asking questions for a month. For example, you know who's had access to the plans legitimately."

"Yes, of course. Exactly two men besides myself -Will Caton and Bruce Winters. And nobody else has seen them, nobody at all."

"Well--" Ken hesitated, feeling certain that Lew Collins was the kind of man who would put complete faith in anybody he trusted at all. "Well, in that case," Ken went on, taking the plunge, "I think any professional detective would concentrate on those two first. Could one-or maybe both of them-have written that letter?"

Angry color flooded Collins' face. "Of course not! It's out of the question! I've known them both since they were kids-helped them get scholarships at the college I went to, and gave them their first jobs five years ago. They came to me together. They've been friends all their lives. Why, they might be my own sons. I'd trust them with everything I've got. So don't get any ideas about--"

He broke off in midsentence, with an apologetic half-smile. "Sorry," he said after a moment. "That was a fool way to carry on. Of course, you were right to ask that question. And, of course, I can't swear to you that neither of those boys would ever betray me. I can only tell you it seems to me the most unlikely thing in the world, simply because I think I know what they're like. But wait-I can tell you something else too, and maybe you'll find this more impressive. Both Caton and Winters are going to own shares in the patent on this machine as soon as we get it. So it's as much their baby as mine. And they've both been saving money toward purchasing stock in the company as soon as a block of it goes on the market."

Pop grinned at his old friend. "You make out quite a case, Lew. I'm beginning to think I'd rather suspect you than either of your young engineers."

Collins smiled, but his voice was serious when he said, "I would myself. I grant you Caton and Winters had the opportunity to take those pictures," he went on, turning to the boys. "We're usually in the lab together, all three of us, but there have been occasions when one or the other of them was in there alone. And I suppose anybody who knew what he was doing could take a picture in only a few seconds."

"That's right," Sandy agreed.

"So, as I say, they had the opportunity," Collins repeated.

"But you don't think they had the motive," Ken pointed out.

"I certainly don't."

“Well, is there anybody you can think of who did have?” Ken asked. “Sticking with the opportunity angle for a minute, is there anybody else who had that? You say only you three have been working on the plans. But isn’t there somebody else who might have been able to get at them, perhaps only for a few minutes?”

That time Collins didn’t snap out of his answer. “Of course, somebody has obviously done just that,” he said after a moment. “But I’m blessed if I know how. There are exactly three keys to the lab, and three to the fireproof cabinet where we keep the plans locked up every minute when we’re not working on them. Each of us has a pair of the vital keys-Will, Bruce, and myself. There aren’t any more. We lock ourselves in the lab when we’re working there, and keep the door locked when we’re not.”

“Did any of you ever lend your keys to anybody?” Ken asked. And when Collins shook his head decisively, he added, “Or mislay them for a couple of days or even a couple of hours, long enough for them to be copied?”

“I never did-to my knowledge,” Collins said slowly. “I keep them on a chain along with my pocket watch, and every time I look at the watch I automatically check to see whether they’re there. Bruce and Will follow the same system.” His eyes crinkled into a reminiscent smile. “They’ve been getting quite a kick out of all the secrecy-which I suppose is understandable at their age. And when they found out where I kept my keys they decided they couldn’t think of anything safer, so they both bought new pocket watches on purpose-stopped wearing the wrist watches they were accustomed to-in order to have a watch chain for their keys.”

“Where is your lab?” Sandy wanted to know.

“It opens off my own office,” Collins explained, “and that’s the only way into it-through my office. That was the outer room of my office you saw me come out of tonight.”

“What about windows?” Sandy asked then.

“Closed from the inside with steel shutters-barred and locked,” Collins told them. “When I had it converted into a lab, because we needed some place where we could work on our machine, we had the shutters put up. The room’s got ventilating ducts, so we didn’t need to worry about air. And we figured the shutters were the safest way to prevent anybody getting into the place. After all, it’s on the first floor-our whole plant is on one floor, you know-so we felt the need of extra precautions.”

“Who else goes into that room, in the ordinary course of a day?” Ken asked.

“No one,” Collins assured him positively. And when he saw Ken open his mouth to ask another question, he added, “No-not even the

cleaning women. We three do the cleaning ourselves, what little gets done. Even my secretary," he added, "who's been with me for nearly twenty years, has never been past the lab door."

"But surely somebody else has been in the room since you started to work on the new machine," Ken said insistently.

"Oh, yes-workmen once or twice," Collins admitted readily. "We needed some rewiring done. But all our equipment was covered up at the time, and Will and Bruce and I were all on the spot, keeping our eyes open. In fact," Collins added, "it's always seemed to me a sensible person would laugh at all the precautions we've taken. But so much hinges on our machine-"

"So you're sure none of the workmen-" Ken began.

"Positive," Collins assured him. "But even if one of them had been able to take a picture, it wouldn't have been *this* picture." He saw the puzzled looks on the boys' faces and hurried on. "You see, this photograph must have been taken within the past three weeks, because the drawing itself was done that recently. It's a revised version of an earlier plan for the same unit. And no workmen-none at all-have been inside that room during the past month."

Suddenly Pop spoke up. "I know I said you'd made out a good case for your two engineers, Lew, and you did. But, after all, a hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money. Now suppose-just suppose, mind you-one of them needed a big stun in a hurry."

"He'd have come and talked it over with me," Collins said quickly. "I'm sure of it. Bruce happens to be an orphan, and Will has only a mother living. They've had plenty of problems to meet from time to time, and I think I've heard about 'em all."

"Wait a minute," Pop said abruptly. "Those names -they've turned up here in the office lately." He shut his eyes for a brief moment of concentration. "Bruce Winters," he said then, "recently got engaged to a pretty wealthy girl, didn't he-to old Charlie Meigs' daughter?"

"That's right," Collins said shortly.

"And Will Caton's mother has just been through a long spell in the hospital." He waited for Collins' brief nod. "So isn't it possible, Lew, that because of these events, the boys-or one of them at any rate-suddenly thought he needed a lot of money? And maybe this time he wouldn't have come to you about it. If I know you've cut your own salary, they must know it too. You couldn't hand out any sizable sum of money. You haven't got it."

"I can only repeat what I've said before," Collins said quietly. "They wouldn't do it-either of them. Betray everything we've worked for, just for money -no. Besides," he added, with a sudden flash of anger in his eyes, "whatever they are, they aren't fools. They'd see just what you see-that they're the obvious suspects in a case like this,

because only we three have access to those plans. And neither of them would pull a stunt which could so easily be pinned on him. Only an idiot would walk into a spot like that.”

Sandy leaned forward suddenly. “But suppose one of them was dragged in? Suppose he’d done something in the past which he doesn’t want known-it might not be anything terrible, but maybe it’s something he’s got to keep secret for some reason. Then, if anybody else learned about that thing, whatever it was, and threatened to disclose it-Well, in that case, isn’t it possible that the photographs would have been paid over, as the price of silence?”

“Price of silence!” Pop repeated disgustedly. “What kind of romancing is that?”

Sandy poked at the letter on the table. “What kind is that?” he asked.

Pop rubbed a rueful hand over his graying thatch of red hair. “It could be, I guess,” he said. “The whole thing is so wildly melodramatic that I suppose any solution to it has got to be melodramatic too.”

“If only you weren’t so sure that lab of yours is burglarproof,” Ken said, looking at Collins. “But you’re an engineer yourself. If you say it is, it must be.”

“Maybe it isn’t,” Collins said unexpectedly. Ken could feel the look of blank amazement settle on his face.

“Seriously,” Collins said quickly, “I mean it. There’s got to be some explanation for that photograph and that letter. I can’t believe I’m wrong about Will and Bruce. But I suppose I could be wrong about that room.”

He pushed back the kitchen chair and got to his feet.

“I’m not going to keep you folks up any longer,” he said. “But I’m asking you two”-he looked at Ken and Sandy-“to come to the plant tomorrow, under the pretense that you’re doing the story for the anniversary edition. You’ve had experience at this sort of thing. Maybe with one glance you’ll see something that I’ve overlooked all along-a way to get into that room that I’ve never known existed.

“I’ll take you in myself, and at a time when no one knows what we’re doing,” he went on. “I’ll get rid of my secretary, and of Bruce and Will too. Well? How about it?”

“What do you think, Pop?” Ken asked soberly.

“It’s up to you, of course-but what harm could it do?” Pop asked.

“Exactly! What harm could it do?” Collins demanded.

“None that I can think of,” Sandy said slowly. “Not that I think we’ll see anything Mr. Collins hasn’t seen.”

“I don’t think we will, either,” Ken said. “But if Mr. Collins thinks it’s safe, then I don’t see how we can refuse.” He got up. “We’ll see

you tomorrow, sir. If you'll phone us and let us know a convenient time, we'll be there."

CHAPTER III

MYSTERIOUS EAVESDROPPER

By midmorning the next day Ken sat idle before his typewriter. He had finished his story on the Halloween party, and Pop and Bert had divided between them the story assignments Ken normally would have drawn for that day. He now had nothing to do until Lew Collins' telephone call.

Maribelle had been in early that day and gone out again. Sandy was still down in his basement darkroom. Pop was at his own desk. Bert was at his, jaw still clenched as angrily as it had been when he first heard the story of the extortion note Lew Collins had received.

"Get this!" Bert said suddenly, rattling a sheet of the blue paper on which the Brentwood Chamber of Commerce sent out its publicity material.

"Our esteemed business tycoon, Robert Jennings," Bert went on, "has been placed in nomination for the job of president of the Chamber of Commerce! What unadulterated nerve! He's willing to head up Brentwood's businessmen-and at the same time he's doing his best to rob the town of one of its important industries!" Bert slapped the paper down on his desk. "When you think that if he'd only get together with a dozen of his well-to-do friends among the stockholders of--"

"Take it easy, Bert," Pop said quietly, cocking an eyebrow toward the door into the busy composing room.

The three of them were alone in the office, but it was understood among the Allens and Ken that the story Lew Collins had told them the night before would go no further.

"Sorry," Bert said, lowering his voice. "But it makes me mad enough to--"

When he bit off the last word, Ken asked him, "Does it make you so mad that you can soar to new heights and figure out how somebody could get into a locked room and into a locked cabinet inside that room? You know," he went on, as Bert and Pop both looked over at him, "I don't see how this trip of ours to the plant today can result in anything but a complete flop. Mr. Collins must know that the room is foolproof. He's smart. He's an engineer. He wouldn't have missed any bets."

"I suppose you're right," Pop agreed. He didn't sound happy. "But just keep your eyes open. You never can tell what you'll see."

"You might find evidence of somebody having tried to pick a lock," Bert suggested.

"I know," Ken told him. "I've thought of that. It's the only thing I have thought of," he added. "And if any lock picking was done, it was done within the last three weeks, after that drawing was completed."

Bert sent Ken a grin of sympathy. "Well, that time element at least cuts down the list of suspects. If you know that the man who wrote that letter must have been in Brentwood within the past three weeks, you can immediately eliminate millions of people."

"Oh, of course," Ken agreed morosely. "We know right off the bat that the extortionist is not a Laplander, or a resident of the Argentine, or of the Malay Archipelago."

"Or of China," Bert pointed out helpfully. Then, tired of his own joke, he dropped it abruptly. "If I were you," he said, glaring once more at the blue Chamber of Commerce release on his desk, "I'd ask a few discreet questions designed to discover if Robert Jennings can pick locks."

"That's pretty loose talk, son," Pop growled. "Libeling a man, even if you don't like him, is a feeble form of humor."

"I didn't mean it as humor," Bert told him.

"You didn't?" Ken's eyebrows went up. "You mean you seriously think--"

"I don't see why he isn't the most likely suspect," Bert said. And in reply to the scornful skepticism written on the faces of the other two, he went on. "He's been itching to sell the plant to Alborn for years, hasn't he? And now he's going to get his way. So what makes you so sure he didn't arrange this extortion deal for that very purpose?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Pop snapped. "Jennings is a respectable businessman. The profit he'll make personally on his thousand shares, if the Alborn sale goes through, couldn't amount to more than ten thousand dollars. He may be mighty eager to make that money, but he wouldn't be so eager that he'd commit a crime to do it."

"You're forgetting the hundred thousand dollars he'd be making as the extortionist too," Bert said stubbornly. "So altogether his profit on the deal would be considerably more than the ten thousand you mentioned. Besides, for all we know, he may think he'll be elected to the Alborn board of directors if the sale goes through--and that would be a couple of extra kudos for him too. In addition to which," Bert added, "he'd have the satisfaction of knowing he'd finally got the best of Lew Collins and all his friends. Jennings was mighty sore when he was voted down on his let's-sell-to-Alborn project a couple of years ago. For all we know, he likes revenge even more than he likes money."

"Bah!" Pop said. "Don't I hear enough of that kind of childish deduction around here from Ken and Sandy, without having to listen to it from you too?"

“Sorry,” Bert said, grinning at his father. “But I was really talking to Ken, not to you. I didn’t ask you to listen.” He turned toward Ken. “But if I thought Jennings owned a trusty lock pick and knew one end of a camera from the other so that he could have taken that picture- Hey!” he interrupted himself. “What happened? You look as if you’ve just seen a ghost!”

“Not a ghost.” Ken grinned faintly. “Just the ghost of an idea. If Jennings-“

“Stop it!” Pop told him. “You’re not going to sit there and tell me you too can visualize Robert Jennings creeping into Lew’s lab like some comic-strip burglar!”

“No,” Ken said. “He wouldn’t have had to do it that way-not if he persuaded one of Mr. Collins’ two young engineers to take the photographs for him. You remember, we wondered last night if somebody could have forced one of them to do it?”

“Ah!” Bert said triumphantly.

“Bah!” Pop said for the second time. “I also remember how unlikely Lew thought it was that either of those two would betray him.”

“But maybe somebody as important in the company as Jennings could convince one of the engineers that it wasn’t any kind of betrayal-that the photographs he was taking would somehow secretly benefit the plant and its whole future. If one of those engineers took some photographs in complete innocence of the whole extortion scheme-” Ken swallowed the rest of his tumbling words as he saw Maribelle coming into the office.

She was in gray today, from the tip of the gray feather on her hat to the toe of her gray shoes.

“You can’t fool me,” she said, eying three heads suddenly bent over three desks. “You were chattering away a mile a minute as I reached the door. I’ve always suspected nobody around here did a lick of work when I wasn’t in the office. Now I know. Well?” she demanded, settling herself in her own chair. “What were you gossiping about?”

Pop avoided looking at Ken and Bert. All of them were determined to keep Lew Collins’ secret from Maribelle, because she always found it impossible to keep any interesting news to herself, no matter how hard she tried. “Don’t judge other people by yourself,” Pop told her tartly.

The phone on his desk rang just then. Grateful for the interruption, he picked it up and handed it to Ken a second later.

Lew Collins was on the other end. “Ken, about that-er-interview we discussed?”

“Yes,” Ken said. “Have you figured out what would be a

convenient hour for us to see you, Mr. Collins?"

"Yes. I think if you'd get out here to the plant about twelve thirty, I could give you a half hour or so myself. The coast will be clear then—that is, that's my usual lunch hour. I have sandwiches sent in, and I thought we could talk while I ate, if that's convenient for you."

Ken understood what he meant. At twelve thirty they would have the office and the laboratory to themselves. "Well be there," he said. "Thanks a lot for arranging to see us."

"Er—not at all. I'll be looking for you."

Maribelle was waiting eagerly for Ken to hang up.

"That was Lew Collins, wasn't it?" she said. "Perhaps he's going to tell you that his machine is finished! Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

Ken looked at her innocently. "Sandy and I are just going over there to start work on the story for the anniversary edition," he explained. "We'd asked Mr. Collins to let us know when he could see us and he was just telling us when he'd be free."

"Oh." Maribelle's voice reflected her disappointment. But a moment later she forgot it as another thought struck her. "You and Sandy! But I thought Bert was going to handle that whole edition!"

"I changed my mind," Pop said brusquely, not looking up from his proofs. "I'm thinking of sending Bert down to the legislature for a couple of days -maybe even longer-so I thought the boys better take over the anniversary issue."

"I see." Maribelle nodded. "Well, let me know if I can be of any help, Ken."

Sandy came up from the darkroom a moment later, and put a sheaf of fresh prints on Maribelle's desk. They discussed them together, and Maribelle chose the ones she wanted to use.

Ken glanced at the clock as they finished their discussion.

"Come on out for a cup of coffee," he said to Sandy. "Mr. Collins just called. He can see us at twelve thirty, and I know you won't be able to control your appetite until we get back from the plant." He wanted to talk to Sandy out of Maribelle's hearing.

"Let's have a sandwich too," Sandy suggested.

"Good idea."

By the time they returned to the office it was a few minutes past twelve. Maribelle, they noticed with relief, had taken off for the luncheon that she was covering that day. Bert and Pop were arguing amiably over which one of them would attend a noontime men's club meeting. The complete silence from the composing room indicated that the compositors and pressmen were eating their lunch on the sunny loading platform behind the *Advance* building.

"Think I should take my camera to the plant, Pop?" Sandy asked.

"Of course," his father answered. "You wouldn't look like yourself

without it-any more than Ken would look like himself without a wad of yellow copy paper sticking out of one pocket. Remember, you're strictly reporters today, so far as anybody but Lew himself knows."

"That's what I figured." Sandy went to his desk to get his case. "Ken told me," he went on, "about the idea that he and Bert--"

At that moment Lew Collins burst unexpectedly into the office. His hair looked rumpled, as if he had been worrying it frantically. His face was pale.

"Lew! What is it?" Pop got to his feet. "Here, sit down, man."

Collins settled into a chair beside Pop's desk without argument. Quickly his eyes circled the room. "Is it safe to talk here?"

Pop nodded. "Nobody can hear you, provided you don't shout."

"I feel like shouting," Collins said, clearly trying to compose himself before he let himself speak of the matter that had brought him rushing to the *Advance* office. "But it wouldn't get me anywhere, of course."

"Out with it, Lew," Pop said. "Tell us what's up."

"We had a board meeting this morning," Collins began. "The thing just wound up a few minutes ago. When I called Ken earlier, I slipped out of the board room to do it. The decision was to offer the plant to Albom, subject, of course, to the stockholders' approval. Jennings was authorized to see the Albom people as soon as possible, and the idea is to try to get an answer from them within a couple of days. Then we'll let the stockholders vote on it. They expect me to help shove that through, of course. And that will be that."

"Mmm." Pop nodded. "But you expected that, didn't you, Lew?"

"Yes, of course." Collins loosened his collar. "What brought me down here was what Jennings said to me at the end of the meeting. He came into my office just a few minutes after I got back there myself--came especially to tell me that he thought we ought to call off those 'young snoopers'"--he glanced apologetically at Ken and Sandy--"who were coming to the plant to get the stuff for the anniversary issue. He said that since everybody knew the boys had 'played detective,' as he put it, having them around would be risky. Because, he said, the man who wrote that extortion note might think we weren't obeying instructions, and might carry out his threat to distribute the plans for the machine."

"But--" Pop broke off. "It's up to you, Lew," he said. "If you think Jennings--"

Collins' big hand waved him to silence. "I'm not making sense," he said. "I haven't made you see the main point--the thing that's got me confused. What bothers me is that I can't figure out how Jennings knew the boys had been slated to come to the plant at all in place of Bert. I hadn't mentioned it to anybody--it was an oversight on my part.

There just wasn't a chance to bring it up this morning."

"It doesn't seem terribly mysterious to me," Ken said, still puzzled as to why Collins was so upset. "Somebody heard you make that phone call here and--"

"That's just it," Collins broke in. "Who? I went back to my own office to make it. Gloria, my secretary, was out. I can see her desk from my own, and there was nobody at it. The door into the lab was closed. I was alone, I tell you. But somebody must have listened in on that conversation and then told Jennings what I'd said. And if Jennings finds out what we're really trying to do--that is, track down the extortionist--he'd really put a spoke in my wheel. His idea is to let everything alone and get the plant sold as fast as possible. But if he's got somebody in the plant spying on me, listening to my phone calls--"

"You're absolutely sure he couldn't have heard it himself?" Pop asked. "Maybe he glanced into your room while you were making the call, heard what you said, and just didn't realize later that he was giving himself away as an eavesdropper, by knowing about the boys."

"It couldn't have happened that way," Collins assured him. "My desk faces the outer door into the hall. I'd have noticed if the door opened. After all, I was a little self-conscious about the call. I was being careful of what I said, just in case the telephone operator happened to overhear a word accidentally."

"Maybe that's what happened," Ken said. "She did overhear. And quite innocently mentioned what she'd heard to Jennings."

"Innocently?" Collins repeated on a wry note. "Telephone operators know lack of discretion will lose them a job faster than anything else. And besides, Emily Hill isn't indiscreet. She's been with us five years, so I've had plenty of chance to observe her."

"You think it's more likely that she did it--well--knowingly then?" Ken asked.

"I hate to think so," Collins said, shaking his head. "I can't believe she'd deliberately spy on me."

"Who else had the chance?" Pop wanted to know.

Ken amplified the question. "Are there extensions on your phone? Could somebody else have been listening in on an extension?"

"My secretary has an extension on her desk," Collins said quickly. "But, as I told you, she wasn't in the office at the moment." He paused. Then he said, with a faintly defensive note in his voice, "And there's an extension in the lab. Bruce and Will were in there working at the time. But they wouldn't--" He shook his head. "You'll say I have no way of knowing that, but I'm just sure they wouldn't. I happen to know neither of them cares very much for Jennings. So even if one of them had overheard a conversation of mine, I can't believe he'd repeat it to Jennings of all people."

Ken and Sandy looked at each other. Earlier that morning even Ken hadn't taken very seriously his theory that Jennings had somehow forced or persuaded one of the young engineers to make photographs for him of some of the secret plans. But Collins' latest bit of news made that idea seem at least possible. If Winters or Caton had indeed repeated Collins' phone conversation to Jennings-

"Well, maybe the boys had better not go out to the plant after all, Lew," Pop said slowly.

"No." Collins shook his head. "I want them to come. Jennings suggested we call off any *Advance* reporters, on the grounds that the plant wouldn't have an anniversary to celebrate by the time next month comes around. But I pointed out to him that if we did that, we'd have to explain why-and that would be difficult without letting outsiders in on the story of the extortion note. So then he backed down right away. No, I want you to come, just as we'd planned," he concluded. "But I wanted to let you know what had happened. And I wanted you to know that Jennings-Well, that there's something going on that I don't understand."

"But it's becoming clearer than ever to me," Bert muttered under his breath, in a voice that only Ken close beside him could hear. "Now if you can just find out that Jennings also picks locks... ."

CHAPTER IV

INSIDE THE LABORATORY

Ken cleared his throat noisily to cover Bert's words. He felt this was no time to air in front of Lew Collins the theory he and Bert had worked out earlier. Collins was too confused and upset at the moment to give it a reasonable hearing. And besides, Ken admitted to himself with a wry grin, the theory itself wasn't any too reasonable. It could do with a good deal more backing.

Suddenly Ken had an idea he thought might be worth an experiment. "I just thought of something," he said. Four pairs of eyes turned on him. "It occurred to me," he went on, addressing himself to Lew Collins, "that while Sandy and I are at the plant today we might be able to help you find out who's spying on you and reporting to Jennings."

"What have you got in mind?" Collins asked.

"My idea is that you'd make another phone call-say to Pop, here-in which you'd say something you think Jennings might be interested in knowing. While you made the call we'd keep an eye on your switchboard girl. If she didn't listen in, and if the message got through to Jennings-well, it would at least suggest-" Ken found he didn't want to finish the sentence.

"Yes," Collins agreed slowly. "I see what you mean. I hate to think of doing anything so underhanded, but I can't go on knowing that Jennings is being kept informed about me." He nodded grimly. "Well try your stunt, Ken. Try it in such a way that only the receptionist and Bruce and Will could possibly be listening in."

"All right," Ken said quickly, thinking that the best way to help Lew Collins was to keep him busy at his problem. "Then let's figure out something you can say over the phone that will surely get back to Jennings-that is, something the informer will know Jennings would want to hear. And of course it ought to be something that Jennings would be certain to react to, too, so that you'll know whether the message has been given to him or not."

"Could you call Pop and say you've got a serious problem on your hands, and you're thinking of taking it to the police?" Sandy suggested.

"If Jennings heard that he'd have the right to bring me up before the board of directors, as a danger to the company," Collins pointed out. "Remember, this extortion business is supposed to be a secret known only to our company's board."

"Right," Pop agreed firmly. "We can't hand Jennings any

legitimate complaint against you.”

“But if we change Sandy’s suggestion just slightly,” Ken said, “it ought to do. Suppose you call Pop and simply ask him if he thinks Chief Kane could be trusted to keep quiet if he were asked some hypothetical question. Don’t say you’ve got such a question in mind. Pretend you’re trying to settle an argument as to how safe it would be to talk to Andy Kane confidentially. If anybody else happened to overhear your question, it wouldn’t seem significant. But to Mr. Jennings it would mean you might be thinking of going to the police about the extortion note-and he’d be sure to come to you and warn you against taking any such step.”

The others considered the suggestion in silence for a moment, and then all four of them nodded.

“That should do it,” Collins said heavily. He got to his feet. “Well, I’d better be getting back to the office. You two coming along? Oh, I almost forgot!” He rubbed a tired hand over his forehead. “Officially I came down here this noon to hand you an ad our board of directors instructed me to place in this week’s *Advance*.” With an ironic flourish he handed Pop a sheet of paper on which an inexperienced typist-probably Collins himself-had written words that Ken and Sandy had seen before, plus an additional phrase that surprised them:

Wanted to buy: foundry equipment in first-class condition. State best terms of payment when making offer.

“The board is trying to stall for a little extra time,” Collins explained, as he watched brows lift in puzzlement over the last words of the advertisement. “Jennings says Alborn can’t be expected to agree to a purchase immediately.”

“O.K., Lew,” Pop assured him. “This will be in tomorrow’s edition. I’ll send you a proof for checking.”

“Thanks.” Collins looked from one to the other of the redheaded Allens and at Ken standing at Bert’s side. “A man never knows what good friends he has until he gets into trouble,” he murmured. Then he cleared his throat. “Well, let’s get along. I’ll put through a call to you at two thirty,” he told Pop. “Want to come in my car?” he asked the boys.

“We’ll take our own,” Sandy told him, and he and Ken left the office with Collins.

Stop lights held up the boys’ car at two traffic intersections, and before they reached the Brentwood Foundry and Casting Company they were several blocks behind the old vehicle Lew Collins drove.

“Are you going to tell him Bert’s and your idea that Jennings and those engineers may be working the extortion deal together-if it turns out the engineers seem to be responsible for the spying routine?” Sandy asked, as they neared the plant.

"I suppose we'll have to-then," Ken said. "But we won't mention it yet. If it proves to be the switchboard operator who is spying for Jennings, for example, I don't see how that would give us any lead to the extortionist. In fact, I don't see how we can believe Jennings has anything to do with the extortion business, unless we discover that he has some tie-up with either Caton or Winters or both of them."

"Or unless we figure out some way to get in and out of that locked lab," Sandy reminded him. "If we do that-if anybody at all could get into that room and photograph the plans, then--"

"Oh, sure," Ken agreed. "Then the extortionist could be almost anyone except a Laplander, a Malayan, an Argentine or a--"

"Are you going crazy?" Sandy interrupted, as Ken braked the car to a halt in the company parking lot.

"Probably," Ken said. "But the explanation isn't worth going into now. Come on."

Side by side they walked through the front door of the factory's administration building. Just inside they found themselves facing a receptionist's desk which the night before had been buried under a mountain of coats.

Ken assumed that the pretty yellow-haired young woman behind the desk was the switchboard operator Collins had mentioned. He recognized her as one of the prize winners of the Halloween party.

"Hello, Miss Hill," he said. "Remember us-from the *Advance*? We have an appointment with Mr. Collins."

"I know." Her bright smile was divided evenly between them. "He told me when he came through here just a minute ago that he was expecting you." She smiled again. "He also said you'd be taking more pictures today."

"That's right," Sandy said. "I'm hoping to take yours this afternoon. The one I took of you last night, by the way, will be in tomorrow's paper."

"Really? How exciting! And the ones you're doing today are for the anniversary edition, aren't they? Goodness, what a lot of publicity we're getting around here! I'm so glad I wore my new suit today." Suddenly she turned businesslike. "Mr. Collins' office is right down the hall, to your right. Can you find your own way?"

"I've got a compass and a sextant," Sandy assured her solemnly. "I think we'll manage."

When they paused at the open door marked M B. COLLINS, General Manager, they could see straight through the outer office to Collins seated behind his own desk in his own cubicle. He saw them too, and came out to greet them.

"This is Gloria's domain," he explained. "Gloria Harris, my secretary. But we use it for a waiting room too," he added, in

explanation of the leather furniture. "Come on in."

He led them through an opening in a glass and wood partition into the smaller room behind it. Once inside, with the door closed, he said quietly, "I'll go through all the official motions. I'll call Don Bascom and tell him you're starting work on the special-edition material, and that you'll want to talk to him after you've interviewed me. All right?"

"Sure. Fine," Ken assured him.

Collins picked up his phone.

"Emily," he said, "connect me with Don Bascom's office, will you, please?" A moment later he was saying, "Don, this is Collins. Ken Holt and Sandy Allen of the *Advance* have turned up here today. They want to start collecting background material for the big anniversary issue Mr. Allen is planning... . Yes, I know. Bert Allen was scheduled to do the story, but he's going to be covering the state legislature session, so Allen assigned Sandy and Ken instead. The reason I called, Don, is that I'm hoping you'll be free to show the boys around... . What? ... No, not right now. I'll be talking to them myself for a while, but that won't take long. So if it's agreeable to you I'll send them over to your office in about half an hour, and let you guide them wherever they feel they ought to go for their first general survey and pictures. O.K.? ... Thanks, Don. They'll be in your office shortly."

Collins put the phone down. Automatically lowering his voice, he said, "And now I want you to take a look at our lab and see if you can figure out how somebody might have got into it without a key."

He crossed the room to a steel door fitted with a patent lock. He showed them his own key on his watch chain, and they both studied the door fastening as he opened it. Ken knelt and studied the lock. A faint shake of his head toward Sandy signaled the fact that he could see no evidence of its having been picked.

In the meantime, Collins had reached through into the inner room and flipped a switch. Light blossomed slowly in the long panels of fluorescent tubes in the ceiling. When the lights had reached their peak, and Ken and Sandy were both inside the laboratory, Collins closed the door behind them.

"It locks automatically from this side," he murmured, showing them that the door remained fast when he turned its knob.

Ken and Sandy nodded their comprehension and turned their attention to the room itself.

It was almost square, with two steel-shuttered windows in one wall. Beneath the windows stood a chemical workbench, littered with retorts, crucibles, racks of test tubes, and other paraphernalia. At right angles to the bench was another worktable covered with all sorts of electrical equipment-meters, wires, a panel board fitted with dials and switches, and other items whose use Ken couldn't even imagine. Along

the opposite wall stood several large objects connected by heavy wires to big switch boxes attached to the wall itself.

"Those are our electric furnaces," Collins explained, following the boys' glances. "We melt various metals in them to make tests of the casting machine."

A lathe and a milling machine were lined up against a third wall, along with smaller pieces of machinery. Cabinets stood in a row along the fourth wall. One of them, taller and wider than the rest, held Ken's gaze longest.

"That's the fireproof steel cabinet I mentioned to you, where we keep the parts of the machine as we finish them, and the master drawings," Collins explained. "We're not making a completely new casting machine, you see. We're just adapting a standard model by changing some of the vital parts. And all the elements we've completed so far have been small enough to put away in there-unless we happen to be experimenting with them on the machine itself at the moment." Collins gestured toward an irregular object which filled part of the center of the room. It was about ten feet long, less than half as wide, and nearly six feet high, and it was completely shrouded beneath a heavy tarpaulin.

"Yes." Collins nodded. "That's the machine itself. I won't uncover it for you."

"No," Ken said. "Of course not. We wouldn't understand it, anyway."

He looked at the walls, which were solid and unbroken. Then he glanced up at the ceiling, formed of what appeared to be sound-absorbent blocks. When he asked Collins about them the man nodded.

"That's what they are. It would get pretty noisy in here, with the machine in operation, if it weren't for that ceiling." He pointed to the circular grills, equipped with slanted vanes in the form of concentric circles. "Those are the air inlets. The smaller grills down there near the floor draw air out of the room. This isn't the most comfortable place in the world, especially in warm weather," he admitted. "But usually we're working so hard we don't notice the heat. The whole lab is a makeshift, of course, arranged when we decided to go to work on our machine."

"But your door is no makeshift," Ken said, kneeling down for another look at the lock.

"No," Collins said. "It was the solidest, safest one we could buy. I gather you don't think anybody could force their way through it."

"No, I don't. Do you, Sandy?" Ken asked.

"I don't see how it could have been managed," Sandy said. "There's not a single scratch around the lock, to indicate that somebody tried to pick it. And no evidence that anybody's been

tampering with the hinges either, to get the door open from that side.”

With one accord, the boys moved toward the windows. The shutter locks were above their heads, so each of them pulled over a chair from beneath the worktables and climbed up to study the fastenings.

After a few minutes of close scrutiny they looked at each other and shook their heads. The locks were crusted with a layer of greasy dirt that must have taken months to accumulate.

Collins interpreted their silent agreement. “Haven’t been opened for a long time, eh?”

“Not that we can see,” Ken told him.

He jumped off the chair, returned it to its place, and studied the big cabinet where Collins had told them the plans were kept. Its lock too appeared to be solid, secure, and free of any signs of someone having attempted to open it by force.

“Do either of your engineers ever take plans home with them, to work on at night?” Ken asked suddenly.

Collins shook his head. “We agreed, all of us, that we would never do that,” he said. “I can’t swear they haven’t done it, of course. But all the plans are on big unwieldy sheets. We keep them rolled-never folded. And it would be pretty noticeable if anybody walked out of here with one of the plans rolled up in his hand. Mind you, I’m not saying it couldn’t be done-any more than I can prove to you that neither of the boys loaned or lost their room keys for a while. All I can say is that I’m convinced it didn’t happen.”

Slowly Ken turned, viewing every corner of the room once more. He knew how much Collins counted on their finding some sign of a stranger having entered it, but the evidence of his eyes-and of Sandy’s too-was all against that having happened.

“You said some workmen came in here once or twice,” Ken remembered. “You’re positive that was done more than three weeks ago?”

“Positive.” Collins took a calendar from one of the drawing boards. “Yes, here’s the date.” He pointed to a ringed figure. “September fifteenth-the electricians arrived. Only the contractor himself came in the morning, I remember, but by the afternoon he had his men here. They were finished the following day. So I’m afraid that incident doesn’t throw any light on our problem.”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t.” Ken felt helpless and futile.

Once more the boys looked at each other and this time they shook their heads faintly.

Collins caught the gesture. “Then you’re finished in here?” he asked.

“I guess we are,” Ken said slowly. “We didn’t really expect to find any way into this room, Mr. Collins,” he reminded the man. “You

yourself said it was foolproof-and I guess it is.”

“Yes. I guess so.” Collins looked grimly disappointed, but he led the way out of the laboratory without further comment, locking the door carefully behind himself after he had turned off the lights.

CHAPTER V

LURE FOR A LISTENER

Collins sank heavily down into the chair behind his desk. He spoke with an effort. "I don't mean to seem ungrateful," he said. "Believe me--"

Bascom's voice from beyond the partition interrupted him. "Gloria?" he asked questioningly. Then a little louder, "Gloria?"

Collins got up, crossed to the door leading to the outer office, and opened it. "Gloria's taking some of her piled-up overtime this noon, Don," he said. "She won't be back for a couple of hours. Anything I can do?"

"I suddenly realized," Bascom said, "that I couldn't remember whether you'd said you'd send Holt and Allen into my office, or whether you wanted me to pick them up. So I just came to check."

"I said I'd send them over," Collins told him.

Ken and Sandy were already moving toward the two men, glad of the interruption. "I think that we've taken up enough of Mr. Collins' time today," Ken said. "So if you're ready to let us bother you for a while--"

"Sure am. Come right ahead," Bascom said hospitably. He turned back toward the hall and bumped squarely into two figures just entering. "Sorry! Hello, Bruce-Will." He raised his brows in mock surprise. "Mean to tell me you two actually stopped for lunch today?" he asked. Then he turned to Ken and Sandy. "These chaps," he said, indicating the newcomers, "would rather work than eat. That's true, isn't it, Mr. Collins?"

Collins smiled at the men coming into the room. "They're hard workers, all right," he said with a note of fatherly pride in his voice. Then he introduced Ken and Sandy to the young engineers of whom he had spoken so warmly.

Ken recognized them immediately as the tallest and the shortest of the prize-winning Seven Dwarfs that Sandy had photographed the night before.

Bruce Winters was considerably shorter than Ken, with a round head above a plump, rounded body. Will Caton was almost as tall as Sandy, but so much thinner that he formed a striking contrast to his friend. Something in their straightforward air in the presence of their superior suggested that they were as devoted to Collins as he believed them to be.

"Hi," Bruce Winters said, offering his hand.

"Glad to know you," Will Caton said. His grin was friendly, but he

looked almost immediately at Collins as if to ask permission to be excused from further social conversation.

Quickly Collins explained that Ken and Sandy were about to begin an overall exploration of the plant, in preparation for writing and illustrating the anniversary edition story.

"Oh? Great. Fine stuff," Bruce Winters said.

"But you don't need us, do you?" Will Caton asked. "We're pretty busy right now. We couldn't tell you much, anyway."

Collins smiled at them. "They won't have to bother either of you right now," he said. "But don't sound so modest. I've been explaining what bright engineers you are."

"Don't believe him," Winters advised the boys, his round owl-like eyes glinting humorously behind his glasses. "Mr. Collins is the only really bright engineer on the premises. Will and I just try to plod along behind him."

"And he makes it mighty difficult to keep up-even to keep him in sight," Will Caton added.

"Go along-get back to your work," Collins told them.

With a farewell nod toward the boys, the two young men headed for the heavy steel laboratory door. Ken noticed that when Will Caton unlocked it he used a key which was, like Collins', attached to a watch chain.

Collins glanced questioningly at Ken and Sandy, as if inquiring their opinion of the employees he had spoken of so highly.

"They certainly seem to enjoy working here," Ken said, feeling uncomfortable again.

Sandy agreed. "Looks as if they think you're a great boss, too."

"We all think Mr. Collins is a great boss," Bascom said. "He's also just as eager to get into that lab as Bruce and Will, so we'd better leave him to it."

Collins walked with them to the door. "I know Don will be a big help to you," he said. Bascom grinned. "If you say so, Mr. Collins, well turn the plant inside out for 'em."

Across the hall, in his utilitarian office, Bascom gestured toward chairs as he sat down behind his desk. "Make yourselves comfortable. Or do you want to start right out on a sight-seeing tour?"

Ken made an effort to say the sort of thing he would normally say at the opening of a detailed research job. "Maybe you'd better tell us first what we ought to look for."

"On the picture end," Sandy put in, "I was wondering if it would be a good idea to make a series showing the whole plant as it might look to a visitor. You know-first a shot of the outside of the building, then one right inside the door, showing the receptionist's desk, and so on down the main hall, with pictures of each office as you come to it,

and finally out into the foundry section. How does that strike you?"

"As a mighty ambitious project," Bascom said, smiling, but he sounded pleased. "Mmm-well, let's see. In that case why don't I give you a quick tour of the plant, so you can get an overall idea of the place. I'll just introduce you to the heads of our departments and then we'll take a look at the foundry."

Ken glanced at his watch. It was after one thirty. At two thirty he and Sandy wanted to be within sight of the receptionist, to see whether she attempted to listen in on Collins' call to Pop, scheduled for that time.

"Sounds like a good idea," he told Bascom. "But we'd better not try for any interviews or shots in the foundry today, because we've got to leave here shortly after two thirty-and we would like to interview Miss Hill and get her picture before we take off. Sandy's already promised her we would."

"I know." Bascom grinned. "She's phoned the news to every office already and told us all to watch for her picture in tomorrow's *Advance*." He got to his feet. "Let's get along then."

Meeting the department heads took a little longer than Ken had expected, because the various men, unlike the young engineers, seemed willing to remember their frivolity of the night before and to discuss the party with others who had been there. Ken noted their names again, in an effort to impress them on his memory-Clark, the chief accountant, a shy man and quieter than the others; Golding, the vigorous sales manager; Gibbons, the chief estimator, and Talbot, the purchasing agent, whom Ken had seen playing a fast set of tennis on the municipal courts; and Delman, grizzle-haired and brusque, the production manager.

But finally they were at the end of the hall and opening the doorway that separated the office building from the big factory itself. Once through that door they were in a new world-a world of noise and heat and smells.

"Whew!" Sandy instinctively covered his ears and then lowered one hand to unbutton his jacket.

"Pretty rough, isn't it?" Bascom said, noticing the gestures. He had to raise his voice to make himself audible. "And we're operating now at less than fifty per cent of capacity." He pointed toward the left, where the machinery in almost half the foundry stood idle and untended. "You should come in here when we're going full blast."

"Isn't it possible to ventilate a foundry?" Ken asked.

Bascom looked amused at his ignorance. "Sure. This is ventilated." He looked upward and they followed his glance to three huge metal ducts running the length of a ceiling which measured at least two hundred and fifty by seventy-five feet. "Without those things nobody

could survive in here,” Bascom said.

Ken nodded, looking with new respect at Bascom and the foundry workmen, who were able to accept such working conditions as part of their ordinary daily lives.

Bascom was still grinning. “Want to give up?”

Ken and Sandy both managed to grin back at him. “Carry on,” Sandy told him, and Ken nodded.

Bascom led the way down the wide aisle that bisected the plant, pausing to explain the various steps in making a casting, and introducing the boys to the foreman of each section. Ken almost forgot his discomfort, as well as the chief purpose of their visit, when he found himself watching men make molds out of a substance that looked like dark sand, and then saw other men filling such molds with smooth-flowing molten metal that gave off waves of heat.

As they reached the far end of the aisle a ladder rose into the air ahead of them to the left, and a movement near the top of it caught Ken’s eye. He looked up to see a small overalled figure emerging through a door in the side of one of the big four-foot-square ventilating ducts, and starting to scramble quickly downward. The man turned toward Bascom as he landed and said cheerfully, “Thought I’d better check that duct while it’s not runnin’.”

“Fine, Ben, fine,” Bascom told him, before he introduced the boys as *Advance* reporters at work on the anniversary story. “Ben Kurowski,” he told the boys. “Our oldest employee.”

“Really? Congratulations, Mr. Kurowski.” Ken made a mental note that either Bert or himself should write a special feature about Mr. Kurowski.

Kurowski thrust forward a hand hastily wiped on a piece of waste. “Yep! I’m a good five years older’n anybody else around here, but I can still climb in and out of the ducts. Yes, sirree! Want me to show you around up there?” He jerked his head toward the open door of the duct.

“Not right now,” Ken began politely, “because—”

“Wouldn’t hurt you none,” Kurowski assured him. “Don’t worry, son, I wouldn’t let you inside a live duct. Too hot. Air too bad. Why, you couldn’t even breathe the air right here in the plant if we didn’t keep suckin’ it out all the time and bringin’ in fresh. Yes, sirree! I turn on those ducts first thing in the morning and don’t turn ‘em off until last thing at night. Come outside,” he added, moving toward a door only a few feet away. “I’ll show you the fan housings.”

“They don’t have much time, Ben,” Bascom said. Then he saw Ken and Sandy step toward the door and once more he grinned. “I get it! You want some fresh air.”

“I could do with a breath or two,” Ken admitted.

“Well, just don’t let Kurowski talk your ear off,” Bascom advised, close to Ken’s ear. “You’d think we had the only ventilating system in the world, to hear him. He should be retired, really-ought to have left several years ago. But he won’t go and Collins is softheaded about the old boy and won’t force him.”

Outside in the fenced area behind the plant, Kurowski had turned around and was pointing up toward three large boxlike appendages built onto the foundry’s rear wall. “Fanhouses,” he explained.

The words were unnecessary. In circular openings cut into the houses the fans themselves were plainly visible. The broad five-foot blades of one of them were still. The other two fans were rotating, sending upward waves of hot, shimmering, gas-laden air.

“Now I’ll show you the motors and belts.” Kurowski was halfway up a ladder leading to the housing of the motionless fan before he finished speaking.

Bascom opened his mouth to call after him. But Ken said quietly, “It’s all right. We’ll just take a quick look.” With Sandy behind him he hurried up the ladder behind the small figure.

Kurowski disappeared through a door he opened in the side of the house. Ken and Sandy joined him.

“Motor,” Kurowski explained, pointing to the big black object directly in front of him, connected by a number of belts to the fan. In the wall opposite the fan was the end of the metal duct that ran the full length of the factory. Kurowski pointed toward it. “That light part way along is the door I left open in the duct. And those little patches of light farther along are the openings that-“

“Yes, sir,” Sandy told him, showing Ken his watch that read ten minutes after two. “We see. The hot air and gases are sucked up through those holes. Now-“

“I can get you some overalls and we can crawl right through,” Kurowski offered.

“We can’t-not today,” Ken said firmly. “Really, we have to get along now.”

“That’s right,” Sandy backed him up. “We’ll want pictures of all this, and a full story of how the ventilating system works, Mr. Kurowski. But that’ll take a lot of time and we just don’t have it today.”

Kurowski looked disappointed. Then he smiled. “All right, boys. Come back any time. I’ll still be here. Yes, sirree!”

Back down on the ground again they thanked Ben Kurowski for showing them around.

“I think we’ve got just about enough time to take a picture of Miss Hill before we have to get back to the office,” Ken said, as he and Sandy entered the foundry again with Bascom. “Tomorrow’s

publication day for the *Advance*, you know, and we all have to be on hand in the office for the last-minute stuff this afternoon and evening.”

It was twenty-five past two when Sandy began to set up his equipment near Miss Hill’s desk. Ken already had his wad of yellow paper in his hand and was asking the first of a series of questions about Miss Hill and her job at the Brentwood Foundry and Casting Company.

“Can’t I make myself useful?” Bascom inquired.

Sandy gratefully took advantage of the offer, and Bascom busied himself manipulating lights.

Miss Hill was quick and efficient, Ken realized. Her fingers controlled the intricacies of the switchboard even while she was answering him. She was in the midst of replying to a question about the factory’s telephone line network when she suddenly broke off, saying in a different tone, “Yes, Mr. Collins? ... The *Advance*? Yes, sir.” She spun the dial. “*Brentwood Advance*? ... Mr. Collins calling. One moment, please... . Mr. Collins, I have your call. Go ahead, sir.” A split second later she was continuing her long answer to Ken and eying Sandy at the same time to make certain he didn’t snap his shutter when she had her head turned away from him.

Watching her closely, Ken knew with absolute certainty that she was not listening in on Lew Collins’ call to Pop.

With practiced smoothness he wound up his questions as soon as he signaled to Sandy that their watchdog chore was done.

“Well, do you think you learned as much about the place as you expected to on a first visit?” Bascom asked, smiling, as he watched Sandy pack up his camera case.

“I think we made a pretty good beginning,” Ken told him. “Thanks to you and Miss Hill.”

Five minutes later the boys were in their car, driving back to the *Advance*. Neither of them spoke. Ken found himself thinking how glad he was that on Wednesday afternoon and evening there was always a steady rush of work at the office. He wondered if Lew Collins would be able to get any work done at all while he waited to see if Jennings learned about the telephone call to Pop.

Ken was convinced now that no one but Collins and the two young engineers had access to the laboratory. And if Jennings did hear about that telephone call, it would also mean that it was the engineers who were spying on Collins for the board chairman. Faced with the fact that his young employees could be guilty of that breach of faith, wouldn’t it be obvious even to Collins himself that they might be collaborating with Jennings on the extortion scheme too?

But having met Bruce Winters and Will Caton, Ken could

understand why Collins felt as he did about them.

“I hope that little trap we just set doesn’t catch anything,” Ken muttered abruptly.

“You and me both,” Sandy agreed.

CHAPTER VI

REPLY TO A WANT AD

There was no word from Collins for the rest of the afternoon, and no message had come from him by eleven o'clock that night when Pop Allen and his weary staff finally left their cluttered desks and headed for home.

Collins didn't call until the following morning, as Pop, Bert, and the boys were eating the hasty breakfast they always prepared for themselves on Thursdays, so that Mom wouldn't have to share the early rising hour that publication day demanded.

Pop took the call, and came back to the table looking grim.

"He heard from Jennings." Pop looked with distaste at the egg cooling on his plate and picked up his coffee cup. "Lew was speaking from a pay phone on the way to the plant. Jennings had reached him at home, just a few minutes before. First said he was calling Lew to report he'd seen the Alborn people in New York yesterday and that they seem disposed to buy the plant. Then he warned Lew flatly against getting any foolish ideas like putting the extortion business to Andy Kane as a hypothetical problem. Lew said there couldn't be any doubt that Jennings knew, word for word, exactly what he had said-what Lew had said, that is-during the call to me yesterday."

Pop put his coffee cup down, empty, and Ken filled it for him.

It was Bert who said, finally, "Then there's no question about it. Caton and Winters must be the channel through which Jennings got the message."

Pop nodded. "Lew sounded as if he'd lost his last friend. That must be the way he feels too. The question now is what can we do about it, if anything?"

"I suppose," Ken said slowly, "we've got to tell Mr. Collins what we think this adds up to-that is, if we do-"

"If we do what?" Pop glared at him.

"Ken means," Bert spelled it out, "that our theory of yesterday looks like pretty solid fact today. If Caton and Winters are willing to cross up Lew on one thing, why not believe they let Jennings persuade them to photograph those plans?"

"As a theory," Pop said slowly, "I don't like it any more today than I did when you first dreamed it up. But I've got to admit somebody had better suggest it to Lew, if he hasn't thought of it himself. If there's still a chance for him to save his plant-" He got to his feet and started for the door. "We certainly can't phone him about this. So you two," he told Ken and Sandy, "had better go see Lew this morning."

Your official excuse can be that you're taking him that ad for checking, which I told him would be done, anyway. But watch your step. Get him by himself, in his office with the door shut, before you tell him what's on your mind."

Sandy and Ken both had some last-minute chores to take care of when they got to the office. It was after nine before their final jobs for that week's *Advance* were done and they were free. Then they picked up a proof of the column containing the ad intended as a notification to the extortionist, and started once more for the Brentwood Foundry and Casting Company.

"Morning, Miss Hill," Sandy was saying ten minutes later. "Sorry I couldn't bring you a copy of the paper with your picture in it. It's not out yet. But it will be in a couple of hours."

"How can I even think about a picture today?" Miss Hill unexpectedly demanded, looking up at them. Once they noticed her red-rimmed eyes they realized she had been crying. "If you've come here for the story," she went on, "there isn't much I can tell you. I think you'd better go straight to the hospital."

"Hospital!" Ken and Sandy repeated the word in unison. "Who's been hurt?" Ken added.

"You mean you didn't know?" Miss Hill stared at them. "Why, I thought that must be why--"

"Please," Ken said, "who's in the hospital, Miss Hill?"

"Why, poor old Mr. Kurowski! Isn't it awful? The night watchman found him lying on the floor alongside one of those big ladders he uses. It must have been up against one of the big ducts, you see, and when it fell, he came crashing down with it. He uses those big ladders all the time to--"

"Yes, we know," Ken said quietly. "We met him yesterday. Will he be going to be all right?"

"It's too early to know yet the doctors said. Mr. Collins promised to call us if he learned anything definite. He went right up there himself, of course," she added. "Left the moment he got in this morning and heard the news."

"We'd better get up to the hospital," Sandy said to Ken. "Pop will want the story." Sandy's glance flicked over the proof he held rolled up in his hand, and Ken nodded. They could show that to Collins at the hospital too, and get him off in a private corner somewhere so that they could tell him what they had come to the plant to say.

The nurse at the main desk of the hospital told them that Kurowski was on the critical list and could receive no visitors except his employer, Mr. Collins, who had been admitted because the patient had no family of his own. Several doctors were conferring at the moment, the nurse added, as to the advisability of an operation. The

patient had internal injuries, in addition to a broken hip. No definite word as to his condition would be available for several hours yet.

"Wish I'd taken a picture of him yesterday," Sandy murmured, as Ken headed for the phone booth in the lobby. "Might cheer him up to see himself splashed all over the paper."

"Who could have guessed this would happen?" Ken said, jamming a coin into the slot. A moment later he had Bert on the wire and was giving him the details of the story, so that at least a brief version of it could be squeezed into that day's edition.

"Seen Collins yet?" Bert asked, when his notes were complete.

"No. He's here, upstairs. We'll wait a while to see if he comes down. But if he's going to be tied up with this business all day, we might as well return to the office."

"I suppose so. Poor guy," Bert muttered. And Ken knew that the words didn't refer to Ben Kurowski.

"Yes," Ken said. "If we learn anything more we'll call you back," he added, and then hung up so that Bert could get to work on the story. It would have to be rushed to the composing room in any case. It was ten o'clock and the *Advance* usually hit the streets each Thursday by a few minutes after noon.

Ken and Sandy waited in the lobby for some time, Sandy pacing restlessly up and down. Then, feeling the eyes of the desk nurse sharply on him, he said to Ken, "Let's go out and sit in the car. We can watch the front door from there."

Sandy brought two containers of coffee from the lunchroom on the corner, and the boys sat in the convertible sipping it and keeping an eye on the door, hoping to see Collins emerge at any moment. Inevitably their thoughts turned to the problem Collins would have to face when he came out of the hospital.

"We haven't really had much chance to discuss this until now," Sandy said slowly. "Are you convinced, from what we know, that the extortion deal was planned by Jennings and carried out with the co-operation of Winters and Caton?"

"That's the obvious explanation, isn't it?" Ken answered. "I admit I liked the look of those two engineers, and I hate to think they've been involved in this scheme. But we haven't run across a single clue pointing to anybody else as the guilty party or parties."

"I know." Sandy sank lower into the seat and rested the container of coffee on his chest. "So now we face the next question: If we're sure of their guilt, how can we stop them from carrying out their scheme?"

"That's the next question, all right," Ken agreed soberly. "But what the answer to it is—" He shook his head.

They didn't have to remind each other of the warning in the extortion letter. They both remembered it all too clearly. If the writer

of the letter was threatened with exposure, the plans of Lew Collins' new machine would be automatically sent out to every important foundry in America and abroad.

"If all three of them were arrested very suddenly," Sandy said, "do you suppose they could really manage to get the plans mailed? If it all happened fast enough, maybe they couldn't."

"Of course they could," Ken said flatly, "if they have it figured out ahead of time. It wouldn't even be difficult. They could have instructed a public stenographer, say-there are hundreds of them in New York alone-to carry out the mailings on the first day she did *not* receive some prearranged phone signal. Or they could have worked out a dozen other similar methods."

"I suppose so," Sandy agreed glumly. "What a coldblooded scheme!" he burst out a moment later. "If I were in Collins' shoes I'd want to say 'All right, mail out your pictures-ruin the plant! But you won't get a red cent out of-'"

"Hold it! Hold it!" Ken was staring fixedly through the windshield.

"Huh?" Sandy sat up suddenly, sloshing the coffee left in his container. He too stared through the windshield. But when he saw that the street was empty and quiet, he turned to stare at Ken instead. "You've got an idea!"

"You were right," Ken said slowly, still looking forward into space. "It is a coldblooded scheme. That is the very essence of it."

Sandy blinked at him, and after a moment he let out his breath in disgust. "Well, congratulations! What a great discovery-that extortion is a coldblooded business! I'm certainly impressed. Yes, sir, mastermind, you-"

Ken did not appear to have heard him. "Coldblooded enough to make use of a colossal bluff," he went on. "But if Lew Collins calls their bluff they can't do a thing about it-and his worries will be over."

Sandy's jaw dropped. "Jumping Jehoshaphat!" he said softly. "Do you mean it? Have you really figured out-"

"Listen to this," Ken said, turning abruptly in the seat to look at him. "What would happen if Collins just said 'All right do your worst. Mail out the plans to everybody. But I won't O.K. the sale to Albarn and that means you won't get your hundred thousand.' Tell me! What would happen in that case?"

"According to the letter," Sandy said patiently, "the plans would be mailed out. As a result of which," he added, "the new machine would be worthless, so far as the local plant is concerned, and the plant would go bankrupt."

"Exactly." Ken took the last swallow of his coffee and began to crumple the paper container in his hands. "Now look at it this way. Let's say the extortion scheme was worked by some complete stranger.

He managed to get into the lab somehow, photograph the plans, and then write his threatening letter. If the threat works-fine. He gets his money. If it doesn't-well, he carries out his threat and the plant suffers. He doesn't. He's no worse off than he was to start with."

"But you're not making sense," Sandy protested. "We're pretty sure who wrote that letter, and it was no stranger."

"Exactly," Ken said again, with even more satisfaction. "I only want to make the point that so long as we *didn't* know who wrote it-so long as we thought it *might* be a stranger-Collins had to take the letter at its face value. But now that we do know, the whole picture is changed. Now we know those plans will never be mailed out, no matter what Collins does.

"Don't you see?" Ken shook Sandy's arm. "To Jennings and Winters and Caton-though not to anybody else-mailing out those plans would be suicide. Jennings would lose his investment in the company, just when the future looks bright because of the new machine. The engineers would lose their jobs and the share they're slated to own in the machine. They dared to pull the bluff-and they obviously expect to get away with it-because they think nobody knows who they are. They're counting on Collins taking for granted that the letter was written by somebody who *would* carry out the threat. It means they can eat their cake and have it too-that they can collect the hundred thousand without losing anything else. They think it won't occur to Collins that the threat is just a bluff. But if he does regard it as a bluff, and calls it-Do you follow me?"

"I follow you." Sandy was nodding his head up and down, grinning from ear to ear. "Oh, brother, do I follow you! Why, all Collins has to do is to say 'I'm ignoring this letter.' That's all! They won't do a thing. They won't dare to-they'd be ruining themselves." Sandy pounded Ken's knee with his fist. "You've done it, Ken! Boy, now let's get to Collins and tell him fast! Do you suppose he might have left the hospital while we were talking and we didn't notice? Stay here. I'll go ask." He was out of the car and sprinting up to the hospital door a second later.

When he came back he was still sprinting. "We missed him. He went out by the back entrance. Left about half an hour ago. Let's get back to the plant. No more news on the old man," he remembered to add.

They walked straight into Collins' office, having encountered his pleasant, gray-haired secretary, Gloria Harris in the hall, who told them that the man they wanted to see was alone.

Collins had his elbows on the desk and his head bowed into his hands. He didn't look up until Sandy quietly closed the door.

"Oh," he said then. "It's you. Sorry I missed you when you were

here earlier. If I'd remembered about that proof I'd have stopped at the *Advance* on the way back here and saved you the trouble of another trip. I'll look at it now." He held out his hand. "Bad business about poor old Ben, isn't it? He's still unconscious."

Automatically Sandy handed him the proof sheet. "It certainly is a shame." Then, as Collins took the paper, he muttered to Ken, "Go ahead. Tell him."

Ken nodded, but it was hard to begin. First he was going to have to point out-if Collins hadn't yet realized it himself-that the men who were trying to ruin him included the two young engineers in whom he had such faith.

"Mmm. Looks all right," Collins was saying. " 'Wanted to buy: foundry equipment in first-class condition. State best terms of payment when making offer.' I guess that's it, all right." He handed the sheet back to Sandy.

Sandy glanced at his watch, saw that it was already past eleven, and realized that the classified page had gone to press. That meant that even if Collins wanted the ad removed, once he'd heard what Ken was about to say, it would be too late. But that wouldn't matter, Sandy supposed.

Suddenly he realized that Ken was plunging into his story.

"Mr. Collins," he began, "we've got a lot to tell you. Some of it is going to be pretty bad news, unless you've already figured it out yourself. But hear us out, please. Because we think you can save the plant-and your machine too."

"You think-what?" Collins stared at him so intently that Ken knew the man felt he hadn't heard correctly.

"Yes, sir," he assured him. "It's like this." Ken talked fast. Sandy put in a word now and then. By the end of fifteen minutes the story was done. Collins still looked dazed and unbelieving.

"You mean," the man said slowly, "that if I get Jennings on the phone right this minute and tell him I won't go along with the sale to Alborn, that-that the whole business will be over?"

"I think it would be, sir," Ken told him.

"But I-I just can't believe it's that simple!" Collins was on his feet. He moved to the window, stared out, turned back toward the boys again, and shook his head. "You think the threat is a bluff and that all I have to do is to call it. That's it, isn't it?"

"That's it," Sandy said quickly.

Collins sat down at his desk again. He still looked drawn and weary. But when he spoke there was a new energy in his voice.

"Let's go over this whole thing once more, right from the beginning," he said.

They went through it again, step by step.

Collins' mouth went tight and grim each time Caton and Winters were mentioned, but he made no comment about his personal reactions to their betrayal.

At the end of the discussion he reached for the phone. A brief call to Jennings' office gave him the information that Jennings had gone to New York that morning for another session with the Albourn people. Collins didn't hesitate.

"Emily," he said, "get me the Albourn office in New York."

None of them spoke while they waited for the call to go through. When he was connected Collins asked first if Robert Jennings of Brentwood was in the office.

"Just left, you say? I see," he said. "Very well. In that case I'd like to speak to Mr. Hadley, please." Briefly he covered the phone with his hand. "I might as well give them the news while I'm about it," he said grimly. He spoke into the phone again. "Hadley? ... Lew Collins here-of Brentwood. I understand Bob Jennings spent the morning with you, and I wanted- ... No, I haven't heard from him yet... . You say-Repeat that, will you, Hadley? I don't believe I quite understood... ."

For several minutes he listened in silence. Slowly an odd half-smile lifted one corner of his mouth.

"I see," he said finally. "Yes, of course. I understand perfectly... . Personally I'm glad it's working out this way." He ended the conversation abruptly.

For one brief moment his eyes went to the door of the laboratory. Ken found himself wondering if Winters and Caton had been listening to this conversation too, and he knew that the same question was in Collins' mind. But Collins' next words thrust everything else out of Ken's thoughts.

"Poor Jennings," Collins said. "To think his scheme would have fallen through even if you boys hadn't shown me the way around it. What neat irony-to think that Albourn wouldn't buy after all!"

"Wouldn't buy!" Ken repeated in amazement. "You mean they've turned down Jennings' offer of this plant?"

"That's just what I do mean." The odd half-smile was still on Collins' face.

"But why?" Sandy wanted to know.

"Their reason is the most ironic part of the story," Collins answered. "Hadley told me they would have been willing to pay the extra fee-he meant the hundred thousand, of course-if they'd been sure it would guarantee them sole ownership of the machine. But they were afraid of a double cross, afraid the extortionist might make plans of the machine available to other plants even after he'd been paid off. And Jennings couldn't give them any definite assurance to the contrary."

Illumination flooded Sandy's face. "Of course he couldn't! He couldn't very well say 'Look, I wrote that letter myself, so I can personally guarantee to you that its terms will be carried out.'"

"That's it."

There was a brisk knock on the office door and Gloria Harris stuck her head into the room. "It's past twelve, Mr. Collins. Shall I order the sandwiches now for you and Bruce and Will?"

"No," Collins said sharply.

Ken could guess the reason for the harsh note in his voice. Collins would find it difficult to share his usual lunch with the two young engineers today. Soon, Ken supposed, Collins would have to face Caton and Winters with what he had discovered about them. But he clearly wasn't ready to do that yet.

"I suppose they"-Collins barely nodded toward the laboratory door-"will give you their order themselves. But I'm eating out here with Ken and Sandy if they're ready for a bite. How about it?"

The *Advance* was ready to hit the street, Ken and Sandy knew. There was nothing they could do if they returned to the office. And they realized that Collins wanted them to stay.

"Fine," Ken said. Sandy nodded agreement.

"Right. Get something good for us, Gloria-nice, big combination sandwiches with lots of pickles on the side."

The sandwiches were large and good. Sandy enthused about them at length. Then, also at length, they all discussed the tragic accident to Ben Kurowski, and Collins talked affectionately about the man's long years of faithful service. But worry over Kurowski's condition prevented even that subject from being an easy one.

The boys made the lunch last as long as they could. But when the sandwiches were finally finished, Ken felt he and Sandy ought to go. To remain any longer would be even more awkward than to leave.

He was about to get to his feet when Gloria Harris once more knocked on the office door and came in. She had several letters in her hand. "The boy has just come from the post office with the early afternoon mail, Mr. Collins," she said.

Collins glanced through the envelopes and suddenly his hand froze on one.

"That looks familiar," he said in a strange, tight voice. Swiftly he ripped it open. His face went white. "I don't understand it," he said, half under his breath. "It's an answer to the ad in today's *Advance*!"

Ken was on his feet beside the desk. "May I see?" Without waiting for a reply he took up the envelope. "Postmarked just an hour ago," he muttered. "At twelve o'clock. But Jennings knew by then that Albion wasn't going to buy! He knew the extortion fee wasn't available!"

"That can't be from Jennings at all!" Sandy said quickly. "He

wasn't even in Brentwood when it was mailed-he wouldn't have been back from New York. There's some mistake!"

Ken felt as if he were sinking into a bottomless pit. "Mistake is right," he said. "Jennings couldn't have written this letter-which means he didn't write the other one, either. He's not the extortionist after all!"

CHAPTER VII

SANDY'S THEORY

It was Collins who said finally, after a silence that seemed to last for hours, "We haven't read the letter yet. Maybe ..." He didn't finish the thought, but his commanding nod drew Ken and Sandy to his side as he picked up the sheet of paper that had dropped from his hands a few moments before. Together they looked at the neatly typed message. It read:

Dear Mr. Collins:

I understand the reference in your ad to "the best terms of payment." I realize that you need time to collect the sum I have asked for, since you will have to obtain it by selling your company to one of your competitors. Large corporations seldom move rapidly, even to take advantage of a bargain such as you are making available to one of them. Therefore I give you one week in which to raise the money. To notify me that it is at hand you will place in next week's Advance the following ad:

Wanted to buy: foundry equipment for cash.

If the ad does not appear, you will know what to expect,

/ also know that you are making attempts to discover my identity.

Please remember my warning on that subject. And believe me when I say that I would have no hesitation in carrying out my threat. So take my advice and call off your amateurish bloodhounds.

Like its predecessor, the letter was unsigned. Collins let the sheet flutter down to his desk when they had all read it.

Ken wished Lew Collins would say something, wished the big soft-spoken man would burst out at him for having raised hopes that were now completely shattered.

Instead Collins said slowly, "Couldn't this letter have been dropped in a mailbox before Jennings left for New York? After all, from the way he spoke to me early this morning, he seemed to think then that the Alborn deal would go through."

"It just doesn't add up," Ken said dully. "Jennings wouldn't have written a letter like this unless he was absolutely sure the deal was going through. We know now that it isn't. So the Alborn people couldn't have sounded as definite yesterday as Jennings tried to make you think. He might have wanted to fool you about their attitude, thinking he could change their minds. But he wouldn't have been fooled himself."

Ken went on after a moment, when nobody else spoke. "No, I was dead wrong-that's all there is to it. Jennings had nothing to do with the extortion deal after all. And it's also pretty clear now that we'd

better get out of here, Mr. Collins-get out and stay out. We've already make enough mistakes. Why, if you'd gone on listening to me, sir, and ignored the demands of that-of the letter writer-he'd have carried out his threat, and the plans of your machine would have wound up in the hands of every foundry in the world."

"We'd better get out, all right," Sandy agreed in a low voice. "Whoever he is, he seems to know all about us. And he's warned you to get rid of us."

"But if we accept the fact that Jennings had nothing to do with this," Collins said, "what can I possibly--"

The phone on his desk jangled and he broke off to reach for it. "Yes?"

In the silent room the boys could hear every syllable spoken by the crisp voice at the other end of the wire. "Mr. Collins, this is Dr. Bauer calling. You wanted me to let you know as soon as Kurowski became conscious."

"Oh, yes-yes." Collins made a visible effort to transfer his thoughts to the newest problem that had been added to his already heavy burden. "How is he?"

"Too soon to tell yet," Dr. Bauer said briskly. "The important thing right now is that he's asking for you -started asking for you as soon as he became conscious a few minutes ago. It's very important that his mind be put at rest. Can I expect you right away?"

"Yes. Yes, of course." Collins answered almost automatically, and he was already getting to his feet as he put down the phone. "I've got to go to the hospital," he said, "right away." He was at the door by the time he finished speaking.

"We understand," Ken assured him. "We're leaving too." He and Sandy also moved toward the door.

Collins paused with his hand on the knob. "I can't urge you to stay. I see how you feel. I don't know what I'm going to do now, about-about everything." He glanced briefly at the closed door of the laboratory, and then away again. "But I expect we'll manage somehow. At least we're in no worse state now than we would have been if you hadn't tried to help," he added. "So don't blame yourselves." Then he was gone, a big tired figure hurrying down the hallway toward the outer door.

"Hi! Looking for me?" Bascom emerged from the office opposite Collins' as the boys stepped into the hall. "I didn't realize you'd be up here today. But I can arrange some free time if there's anything you need me for."

"Thanks." It was an effort for Ken to speak normally in response to the good-natured query, when his only desire was to put as much distance as possible between himself and the Brentwood Foundry and

Casting Company. "We just dropped in to say hello to Mr. Collins and ask about Mr. Kurowski. We hadn't planned to do any work on the story today."

"Oh. I see. Poor old fellow," Bascom added, sounding more kindly toward the ventilation engineer than he had the day before. "But I suppose we all forget to take precautions once in a while."

Ken's instincts as a reporter overcame for a moment his eagerness to leave the building. "You've figured out how it happened then?"

"I guess it's obvious," Bascom said. "There are safety gadgets on those ladders-iron angles that rest against the ducts. And I guess, just this once, old Ben didn't have the angles properly in place. Well, I've got a thousand things to do, so I'll be getting along. I suppose I'll be seeing you soon." And Bascom left them, with a friendly wave of the hand.

They managed to get past the receptionist when she was busy putting through a call, and made their way straight out the door, down the walk, and into the parking lot.

Ken gestured toward the steering wheel of their car. "You take it," he said. "I'd probably run us straight into the first stone wall we came to."

"Don't sound as if you're the only person in the whole world who ever made a mistake," Sandy said gruffly. He flipped the ignition key on. "Well, shall we-Hey! Look there! Where do you suppose they're rushing to?"

The tall, thin figure of Will Caton was striding into the parking lot. Bruce Winters, beside him, was almost running in his effort to keep pace with Caton's long legs.

"They weren't asked to go to the hospital too," Sandy pointed out. "We heard what that doctor said. And they've had their lunch. Ken," he added suddenly, "do you think they might have handled the extortion business all by themselves? Just because we made a mistake thinking Jennings was involved doesn't mean we were wrong to think they had a hand in it, you know."

"Doesn't it?" Ken couldn't take his eyes from the hurrying figures, but he was determined not to let himself leap to some new unfounded conclusion.

"No, it doesn't!" Sandy snapped. "And you know it. Come on. Use your head. What about those two, anyway? Things have happened so fast in the last few minutes we haven't even had a chance to think about them. But somebody wrote those extortion letters, and why couldn't they have done it?"

"I don't know," Ken said slowly.

Caton got into a battered green sedan and Winters jumped in beside him as its motor started. The sedan moved out of the parking

lot.

"We're going to see where they're going, at least," Sandy announced, and released the brake on the convertible. He turned into the road only a few hundred feet behind Caton's car, which was heading toward the center of Brentwood.

"Get your mind working on this, will you?" Sandy urged, as Ken continued to sit silently beside him. "When we first heard about the extortion note, we said those two were the likeliest candidates, didn't we?"

"That's right. And Collins said they couldn't have done it."

"Exactly. So then we gave that lab a careful going-over and figured out that nobody but those two could have taken the pictures of the plans. After which-having come to suspect Jennings as the planner of the scheme-we figured the engineers might have been forced or persuaded into taking the pictures for him."

"And we were wrong."

"Sure. We were wrong about Jennings." A truck turning in from a side road hid the sedan from sight, and Sandy craned his neck to make sure he was still on the tail of the green car. "But what proves we were wrong when we decided Caton and Winters had to do the photography?"

Ken didn't answer.

Sandy replied to his own question. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Right?"

"I guess not," Ken admitted.

"I guess not too," Sandy said with grim satisfaction. "So all we have to do is admit the possibility that those two planned the extortion scheme and are doing all the work on it, and we've still got a pair of perfectly good suspects. What's more," Sandy added, "those suspects are now behaving in a peculiar manner for men who have the reputation of never leaving the lab unless they're driven out of it."

"Careful!" Ken said sharply. "They're turning right at the next corner."

"I see them," Sandy said. "But thanks just the same," he added dryly. "I'm glad to know you haven't gone to sleep."

Ken grinned a sour grin. "Don't worry. I'm not asleep. I just wish I were. It would be great if we could wake up tomorrow and find out this whole mess had been a nightmare. But you're right, I guess," he added in a different tone. "We'd better find out where those two are going, just in case."

When Sandy had made the turn after the other car, they found themselves on a quiet residential street. Three blocks farther on, the green sedan stopped before a rather shabby wooden structure that had all the earmarks of a boardinghouse. Sandy halted cautiously a block

away.

They could see Bruce Winters jump out of the car and run into the building. He remained in the house for several minutes, came out on the run, leaped into the car again, and the sedan took off once more.

This time it went only four blocks, turned into another residential street, and stopped again before a small neat cottage half buried under a big wisteria vine. This time it was Will Caton who left the car, remained away for perhaps five minutes, and returned.

When the green sedan moved away from the curb, Sandy started up the convertible again and followed.

"Where to now, I wonder?" he said. "Does it occur to you that they look like a couple of guys picking up their valuable possessions before leaving town?"

"Neither of them brought bags out of the houses where they stopped," Ken pointed out. "If that's what they're doing, their valuable possessions can't amount to much."

"They can't risk carrying bags, maybe," Sandy said. "All they took was their ready cash."

"And why are they leaving?" Ken wanted to know. "Have you got that figured out too?"

"Because they listened in on that phone call to the Alborn office," Sandy answered, "and learned that the Alborn deal is off-that there is no chance of collecting that hundred thousand in return for photographs of the plans. Their big gamble won't pay off, in other words, but there's still a chance that they might be identified as the extortionists. So they're leaving before that can happen. How does that sound?"

"Leaving their rights in the machine-which might be worth something eventually even if the Brentwood Foundry and Casting plant does go broke right now? No," Ken said, "that doesn't sound very likely to me. If they are the authors of those extortion notes, and if they listened in on that call, they may know by now that their big money-making scheme isn't working. But they also know nobody can pin it on them as things stand. They'd be perfectly safe staying right here in Brentwood as long as they don't do something as suspicious as running away."

The green sedan, with the boys' convertible a short block behind, was entering the business section of Brentwood.

"All right," Sandy agreed. "If you don't like my explanation, what's yours?"

"I don't have one," Ken told him. "But I've got to admit I'm getting pretty curious about this performance. Watch it!" he added. "They're turning into the municipal parking lot."

"We'd better go past it," Sandy said. "We don't want them to see

us.”

“But that way we might lose them altogether.” Ken was sitting forward on the edge of the seat. “I know. Let me out here,” he said suddenly, reaching for the door handle. “I’ll try to discover where they’re heading, and meet you in the doorway of Sam Morris’ jewelry shop.”

“Keep after them if you have to,” Sandy said quickly as he slowed down close to the sidewalk. “We can always find each other again eventually at the office, or check in there by phone.”

Ken nodded, slipped out of the car, and hurried a few yards along the sidewalk to conceal himself in the sheltered doorway of the jewelry store. From there he could see the parking lot entrance. Sandy had scarcely driven out of sight around the corner when Winters and Caton hurried out of the lot on foot and started across the street on a long angle. A moment later they had disappeared through a pair of heavy glass doors.

Ken stared blankly at the gleaming entrance. Caton and Winters had entered the First National Bank.

It was beginning to look to Ken as if there might be something in Sandy’s theory after all.

CHAPTER VIII

POSTMARKED TWELVE O'CLOCK

Ken waited for a full minute, then he too crossed the street toward the bank's doorway and strolled past it. Through the swinging glass panels he could clearly see Caton and Winters just inside the low railing that partitioned off the desks of the bank's officers. The two young engineers were seated beside the desk of Mr. Crocket, custodian of safe-deposit boxes.

A moment later Caton and Winters were being shepherded through a narrow door a few yards behind Crocket's desk. That door, Ken knew, opened onto a flight of stairs that led downward to the bank's big vault and to the safe-deposit boxes.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ken caught a glimpse of Sandy hurrying toward the jewelry shop. Ken crossed the street to intercept the redhead.

"Our friends are on their way downstairs to the basement of the bank," Ken reported. "Apparently they are either going to put something into a safe-deposit box-or boxes-or take something out."

"Ah-hah!"

"Exactly," Ken agreed. "Maybe they are getting ready to leave town after all."

"In that case we certainly don't want to lose them when they come out of the bank," Sandy said. "I'll tell you what. I found a parking spot along the curb, just beyond the next corner. And the car's headed this way. So if we're sitting in it we can see them come out and cross the street, and we'll be able to drive down as far as the parking lot before they leave it."

"Good idea."

They looked back several times as they walked to the car, to make certain they weren't missing their quarry. Then they settled in the convertible once more and concentrated their attention on the bank door less than a block away.

They had over half an hour to wait before they saw what they were looking for-the tall figure of Caton and the shorter one of Winters, leaving the bank and hurrying across the street to the parking lot.

"Now where?" Sandy murmured, turning the ignition key. He was edging out of his parking place when Ken said suddenly, "Wait, they're not getting their car!"

Caton and Winters had started into the parking lot, paused suddenly, talked for a moment, and then turned around and come

back onto the sidewalk. Now they were striding swiftly up the street toward the boys' car.

"We'd better leave the convertible right here," Sandy said, and backed the car against the curb again. An instant later the boys were walking quickly to the opposite sidewalk, to find a vantage point

Sheltered by the awning, they watched the two men where they would be safe from meeting Caton and Winters head on.

The broad awning of a men's furnishings store sheltered them as they watched the two engineers walk past on the other side of the street. Ken and Sandy let them get half a block ahead before they stepped out from under the awning to follow.

Caton and Winters reached the intersection with Third Avenue, turned right into it, and were still swinging down Third when the boys rounded the corner after them. But before Caton and Winters reached the next corner they disappeared through a doorway.

"It's not—" Sandy glanced quickly at Ken and they quickened their steps. After another dozen yards they could be sure. "It is! They went into Jennings' real-estate office!"

For a moment the boys stopped dead and stared at each other.

"But we just proved that Jennings couldn't have been in on the extortion deal," Sandy muttered confusedly. Then he said, "Could this be the windup of the spying-on-Collins business—a separate deal entirely from the extortion scheme? Jennings," Sandy hurried on, sorting out his thoughts as he went, "could want information on Collins just to prevent Collins from doing anything that would mess up the sale to Alborn. And of course Caton and Winters—if they're the extortionists—would have been glad to oblige. They want an investigation even less than Jennings does."

"And you think they're being paid off now?" Ken asked.

"Could be—couldn't it?"

Ken was suddenly aware that they were conspicuous among the leisurely afternoon shoppers. "Let's duck into that drugstore across the street and have a coke while we wait this out."

They finished their drinks in almost complete silence, unable to talk freely about the one subject that occupied their minds.

"I wish this weren't working out the way it seems to be working out," Sandy said abruptly.

"So do I."

Finally, after spending ten minutes idly breaking their straws into small pieces, they ordered more cokes.

The clock above the counter agreed with Sandy's watch. It was two forty-five. Caton and Winters had been away from the plant for well over an hour.

At a few minutes before three the two men finally emerged from

Jennings' real-estate office. Even at a distance and through the drugstore window, it was apparent that they felt triumphant about something. Caton's long legs were striding faster than usual, back in the direction from which they had come. Winters' stubby figure almost bounced in his effort to keep up.

Ken hastily put down the money for their drinks, and he and Sandy took up their pursuit.

Five minutes later Caton and Winters were entering the bank once more.

"Funny," Sandy said, puzzled.

For a moment they were undecided as to their next step, but finally they returned to their parked car and this time they waited in it again for almost half an hour. Then Sandy barely got the convertible in motion in time to swing into the lane of traffic a few cars behind the battered old green sedan as it came out of the parking lot.

"Looks like a complete round trip," Ken muttered not long afterward. Caton seemed to be driving back to the wisteria-draped cottage which had been the men's last stop before their first visit to the bank.

His guess proved right. The only difference was that this time, when Caton parked in front of the cottage, both men got out and went into the little house.

The red convertible was too noticeable on that quiet street. Sandy pulled around a corner and parked in the shadow of a towering hedge. By shifting the angle of his rear-view mirror he could keep the hood of the sedan in view.

Ten minutes later the engineers were back in their car again.

Sandy, muttering irritatedly under his breath for not having turned the convertible sooner, had to back twice in the narrow house-lined street before he could take off after the sedan. When he swung into the block in which the sedan had been parked, the car had disappeared.

Sandy stepped down hard on the accelerator and reached the corner within a few seconds. No green sedan was visible in either direction.

"What an idiot I am," Sandy said furiously. "Now I've let them get away."

"Let's drive right on to that boardinghouse and see if that's where they are," Ken suggested.

"Might as well."

They remembered easily enough the location of the big shabby building. But there was no sedan in sight in front of it.

"Maybe they came a long way around and haven't got here yet," Ken suggested. "Let's wait a minute."

At the end of five minutes, he said, "No, they'd be here by now, if this was where they were heading. Another bad guess."

"Do you think we should try the railroad station and the airport?" Sandy asked worriedly.

"What good would it do?" Ken wanted to know. "Even if we saw them about to board a plane, we couldn't stop them. We couldn't prove they were guilty of anything. Besides," he pointed out, "if they are leaving town they might just as likely be taking off in their car. And we certainly couldn't get a roadblock set up, or check all the roads ourselves."

"You're right." Sandy sounded as discouraged and disgusted with himself as Ken had earlier in the afternoon. "So what next?"

"I think," Ken said slowly, "we ought to go back to the plant. I know we said we wouldn't. But it seems only fair to let Collins know what's happened. Our excuse can be," he added, "that we want to know if there's been any news about old Kurowski."

"All right." Once more Sandy got the car moving.

"I think my picture looks simply wonderful!" Miss Hill said, the moment she saw them. "Really, I'm so grateful. I'm going to buy at least a dozen copies of today's *Advance* to send to all my aunts and cousins."

Sandy managed a flattered grin. "Thanks. Glad you liked it."

Then he and Ken, depending on their established role as reporters to get them by without questions, hurried on past her desk and down the hall to Collins' office.

The door was open. And the door beyond, into Collins' private office, was open too. Gloria Harris was standing in it, her back to the boys. Collins himself was invisible, but his voice could be heard.

"Are you serious?" he was demanding incredulously. "Do you mean it?"

Instinctively Ken and Sandy moved closer until they were right behind the secretary and could see over her gray head. The sight that met their eyes startled them into motionlessness.

The two men they had been trailing all afternoon -the men they had suspected of being on their way out of Brentwood-were standing on either side of Collins' desk, grinning down at him. And as the boys stared at them in complete amazement, Caton and Winters both began talking at once.

"Of course we mean it!" Caton announced. "It was a chance we couldn't pass up. Besides, now you'll never have to worry about Jennings again. If he doesn't own any more stock, he won't have any voice in managing the plant."

At the same time Winters was saying excitedly, "Boy, will he be sorry when we get the machine done and the old Brentwood Foundry

and Casting Company starts making big profits! Guess he doesn't have any faith in the machine, or he'd never have let go of his stock. But we'll show him, won't we?"

Collins, looking as confused as Ken and Sandy felt, got to his feet. "Wait a minute!" he urged. "Let me catch my breath. I still-" His glance went past Gloria Harris to the boys. "Ken! Sandy!" he said.

"Come in. These two"-he gestured toward the two engineers-"have just been telling me such a startling piece of news I can scarcely believe it."

"Hi!" Winters' round face broke into a grin. "The press! You're just in time for our big story. Of course," he went on, still grinning, "it may not seem like much of a story to you, but it's the greatest news of our lives. We"-he waved toward the tall, gangling figure of Caton, who was also grinning-"have just become important investors in this firm! Had to clean out our bonds, borrow on our life insurance, arrange for a mortgage on Will's house, and scrape the bottom of our savings barrel. But we've got our stock!" He picked up the stiff crackling papers that had been spread out for Collins to see, and waved them triumphantly. "Isn't it terrific?"

"It's great," Ken managed. "Congratulations." So that's what they were doing, he was thinking blankly. So that was it!

"It sure is-just great." Sandy's echoing voice was little more than a croak.

"They've bought Jennings' stock, you see." Collins was speaking to Ken and Sandy and obviously trying to tell them more than his words implied. "Jennings suddenly needed some cash-according to Bruce and Will-and since he remembered they'd been saving their money toward a stock purchase, he called them up and told them they could have all his shares at the price he'd originally paid for them."

For a moment there was silence in the office, except for Gloria Harris' soft, "It's wonderful. I'm so pleased for you both!"

While she beamed at the youthful engineers, Collins still looked fixedly at the boys. There was unmistakable relief on his face, at the realization that the engineers' purchase of stock absolved them completely from any suspicion of having tried to destroy the company by extorting money from it. But there was deep concern and anger in his expression too, because he knew that Jennings, worried about his investment once the Alborn sale had fallen through, had deliberately unloaded on Caton and Winters a block of stock that was almost certain to be worthless within a few days.

Ken understood the confusion of Collins' reactions, because his own were just as confused. And when Collins added slowly, "I hardly know what to say to them," Ken heard the unspoken thought behind those words. Collins didn't want to tell the young engineers the truth

about the stock they had just bought with such pride and enthusiasm—any more than he wanted to let them know he had been led to suspect them of betrayal and worse.

Ken blushed at the knowledge that he was responsible for driving Collins into suspicions that had now proved totally false. If he could only make up for that mistake, he thought desperately, by—

“Don’t worry, boss,” Winters was saying cheerfully. “You don’t have to say a thing except yes.”

“Yes?” Collins echoed blankly. “Yes to what?”

“To our invitation to dinner,” Bruce explained. “You can’t refuse, so there’s no use trying. We’ve already been to your house and arranged it with Mrs. Collins. My girl and Will’s mother are cooking us up a feast to celebrate the good news. I think both of them are as excited as we are, don’t you, Will?”

“Mother said she never thought mortgaging her house could be such a cheerful business,” Caton said. “We want you to be there too, Miss Harris,” he added. “Bruce will pick you up and bring you to my house, along with his girl. We’re eating there.”

“That I will, mademoiselle,” Bruce Winters said, with an attempt at a low and elegant bow. “And you have to accept our invitation,” he added firmly, “so that we can prove to you that success has not changed us—that we are still the fine, simple, upstanding young men we were long ago, before we owned any stock at all.”

Gloria Harris laughed helplessly. “Of course I’ll come. You idiots! Thank you very much.”

“Fine!” Winters straightened up. “I’ll be at your house a little before six.” He turned to Collins. “Mrs. Collins said six o’clock was a convenient hour for you people,” he explained.

Collins looked once more at Ken and Sandy. He obviously did not feel like an evening of celebration. And yet he just as obviously could not refuse this particular invitation without making explanations which, at the moment, he didn’t have the heart to begin.

“When powerful stockholders give a plant general manager an order,” he said finally, turning to Winters and Caton, “he can do nothing but obey. We will be on hand at six.” Then his voice softened. “Thanks very much, boys. I’m proud to be your guest. And now go along, both of you. You won’t get any more work done today, anyway. And you might as well go on home too, Gloria, and start prinking for this gala event.”

They didn’t argue with him. They left almost immediately, the men still grinning from ear to ear, and Miss Harris still repeating her warm congratulations.

In the silence after their departure Collins sat down heavily. “What could I have done?” he murmured, half to himself. “They’ll have to

know the truth. But I can't tell them tonight. I just can't." He looked up at the boys. "I'm glad you were on hand to hear all that."

"So are we," Ken said quietly. "And we certainly owe you an apology for--"

Collins held up his hand with a tired smile. "No, you don't. I got you into this. And certainly there did seem to be evidence of their having listened in on my calls. Even now I can't understand how Jennings has known what I've been saying over the phone. And of course since that second letter came this morning in answer to our ad- or this afternoon, I guess it was--"

Ken interrupted him without realizing it. The words he spoke aloud were words suddenly repeating themselves inside his head with the blazing force of a stroke of lightning. "The letter was postmarked twelve o'clock," he said.

"Eh? Oh, yes, I guess it was." Collins sounded surprised at Ken's insistence on the detail. Sandy, Ken was vaguely aware, looked equally surprised.

"Mr. Collins," Ken said, and knew his voice had a strained, unnatural quality, "may I use your phone a moment? It may be important."

A moment later Ken was speaking to Bert. "This is Ken," he said. "I've got to know, Bert, what time the paper hit the street today? ... The usual hour? ... Well, did anybody come into the office ahead of time to buy a copy before that? ... Right. Thanks. ... No, I'll explain later." Ken let the phone fall into its cradle with a little thud.

"What was all that about?" Sandy demanded.

Ken shook his head, not answering. Without asking permission he picked up a desk pad, took a pencil from his pocket, and scribbled a few words on it. He showed the pad to Collins and gestured for Sandy to look too.

The words he had written loomed large and black on the page. They said: *This room is bugged. Be careful what you say until we can locate the microphone.*

CHAPTER IX

DEAD END

Sandy and Lew Collins, looking up at Ken after reading his note, could not have appeared more startled if a space-suited man from Mars had suddenly crashed through the ceiling and landed at their feet.

"This room is-!" With a tremendous effort Sandy swallowed the last word of his sentence, in response to Ken's violent gesture of warning.

"That's right," Ken said. "I'm sure of it." He cast desperately around in his mind for some way to explain his reasoning to the other two, but now that he was convinced the extortionist could overhear every word spoken in Collins' office, he could think of nothing that he dared say.

Finally he said aloud, for the benefit of the microphone he felt certain was concealed somewhere in the room, "Er-Mr. Collins-we really came back here today to ask what you'd learned about Mr. Kurowski." At the same time he scribbled *Keep talking- please!* on the pad and showed it to the other two. Then he bent over the pad once more and started to write at top speed.

Sandy, still looking dazed, nevertheless reacted to Ken's plea for co-operation as he had done so often in the past. "Yes, we did, Mr. Collins," he managed. "How is he? Are the doctors going to operate? On Mr. Kurowski, I mean?"

"Operate?" Collins looked from Sandy to Ken's flying fingers and back again. He seemed utterly confused. "Yes. Yes, they are. But I don't see what that's-"

Sandy leaped in. "Oh, that's fine! At least I guess it is, isn't it, sir? I certainly hope he pulls through all right. Do the doctors think he will?" Sandy could see that Ken had almost filled one of the small sheets of paper on the desk pad, and he realized that in a moment Collins and himself would be learning at least something of what Ken wanted them to know. "He looked pretty tough to me," Sandy stumbled on. "Wiry, you know. I realize he's not young any more, but he looked strong."

Ken ripped off the sheet he'd been writing on and handed it over. "That's what I thought," he said, starting on the next sheet. "I mean, I thought he looked strong too."

Sandy held the small piece of paper so that he and Collins could read it together. Ken had written:

My reason: today's letter postmarked 12 noon- therefore mailed before

12. But Advance not on street until 12:15 and Bert says no copy bought in office earlier. So letter writer could have known exact contents of ad only by hearing proof read aloud here this morning. But we three were alone here then. So- office must be bugged!

Amazed comprehension flooded Collins' face. "Of course!" he muttered. "Of course!"

Sandy clapped a hand on Ken's shoulder to let him know he agreed fully with his friend's reasoning. Then, in keeping with the role he was supposed to play, he added, "In that case he ought to pull through all right. Don't you think so, sir?"

"Yes. Yes, I do." Collins' voice had lost its note of vagueness and confusion. And his decisive nod told the boys that he now understood Ken's strange behavior. "If there's anything I can do, of course," he added significantly, "I hope I'll be called on."

Ken sent him a swift, relieved grin, to acknowledge the message in Collins' words, as he handed over the next sheet of notepaper. On it he had written:

Let's look for bug, but without giving ourselves away. Can you give us necessary time by saying you have to sign mail?

Collins nodded in answer. "As I say," he declared aloud, "I want to do anything I can." He smiled faintly at the double-talk the situation demanded. "I'll give you the full details of what I learned at the hospital," he added, "but first I have a batch of mail here to sign. So if you two don't mind amusing yourselves for a while-there are some magazines over there on that table-I'll get the job out of the way."

"Sure." Ken reached for one of the magazines on a small table and rattled it noisily. "Here, Sandy."

"Thanks." But Sandy already had his back turned to Ken and was pulling away from the wall a framed photograph of the plant, in order to look behind it for the small telltale disk. "You go right ahead, Mr. Collins," he said.

Ken scribbled one more note to Collins. *Check interior and undersides of desk drawers*, it suggested.

Collins nodded. "This may take me some time," he said, and eased his top desk drawer quietly out of its slots to study it carefully.

"We're in no hurry," Ken said reassuringly, as he started to search the opposite side of the room from Sandy.

Ken was still acutely aware of the mistaken conclusions he had been led to during the past few days, but this time he didn't see how he could be wrong. It seemed absolutely certain that it had not been Collins' phone that was being tapped, but the entire room. And if a microphone was found, its wires should lead them, he felt sure, straight to the man who had installed it-the man who had written the extortion letters.

Collins' office was small. Ken and Sandy had checked all the pictures on its walls within three minutes. By that time Collins had also thoroughly investigated every surface of his desk, and reported his lack of success with a negative shake of his head. Quietly, then, he began to explore a small closet in one corner, while the boys lifted the edges of the rug and then inspected the chairs and every other piece of furniture in the room, including the dictating machine and the desk lamp. There was no sign anywhere of the small object Ken had been so confident they would find.

Ken bit his lip. He'd been so sure he was right this time! But they had explored every nook and cranny where-

Suddenly Sandy grabbed Ken's arm and pointed upward. Ken followed his glance and took a deep breath. Of course! The grill of the air inlet set into the ceiling would make an excellent hiding place for the small bug. But to check on the presence of a microphone behind the grill, it would be necessary to remove the metal grill itself. They would need a screw driver for the job-and enough sound to cover up the noise of using it.

Once more Ken grabbed the little desk pad and scribbled a message on it. Collins read the words, grinned, and nodded to indicate that he could supply both of Ken's penciled requests. First Collins opened a bottom drawer of his desk and took a screw driver from among the handful of tools there. Then, as he handed that to Sandy, he said aloud, "There! Those letters are finished. Now I've just got to make a phone call and then I think I'll be about through here for the day."

Keeping the contact bar of the phone depressed with one hand, Collins let the phone rattle slightly as he picked it up. "Emily," he said, "get me Bob Wallace, will you?" He winked at the boys as he spoke, and drew toward himself a sheet of figures lying on top of his desk. "Bob?" he said a moment later, on a booming note of good-fellowship. "This is Lew. I've got those figures for you. Want me to read 'em out? ... O.K. Here goes." And he began to reel off the long column of numbers on the sheet of paper in front of him.

Ken and Sandy hadn't waited for him to get that far. As soon as he started the fake call, Sandy had leaped to the top of Collins' desk, which stood directly beneath the air inlet. By the time Collins' voice settled to its steady recital of figures, Sandy was cautiously loosening the two screws that held the small circular grill in place. One by one he handed the screws down to Ken, and then gave Ken the screw driver in order to leave his own hands free for lowering the round metal fixture formed of concentric circles mounted on a frame. When he handed Ken the grill, he raised himself on his toes to peer directly into the duct that was now exposed. A moment later he looked down at Ken, grinned widely, and nodded his head. Ken grinned back at

him.

Collins, who had been watching them both as he talked, signaled his understanding with a wink, and broke off his recital of figures. "Well, I guess that's the lot, Bob," he said. "I'll check with you about them on Monday." As he cradled the phone again he was craning to read the message Ken was swiftly writing:

So far so good. Now can we get above your office and see where the wires go?

Collins nodded his answer to the question. Aloud he said, "Well, that's the end of my work for today, boys. Now I can tell you what little I know about Kurowski's condition. But why don't we take a walk through the foundry while we talk?"

He looked at his watch. Ken, looking at his own, saw that it was five o'clock.

"The workmen will all be gone by now," Collins went on. "Our shop closes at four thirty. But there may be a few things I can explain to you that you haven't known about before-things you might want to use when you come to writing your story, I mean."

"Fine," Ken told him. "We had a quick walkthrough with Mr. Bascom yesterday, but there's a lot we don't know about yet."

"Come on then."

By mutual consent they didn't speak again until they had passed through the heavy door that separated the administrative section of the plant from the high-roofed foundry area. Collins closed the door, sealing them off among the machinery and equipment of the silent foundry.

"Whew!" Sandy breathed.

Collins pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket to mop his brow. "I believe what you've been telling me," he murmured. "Or should I say what you've been writing me? But I still can't quite take it in."

"There for a while I thought Ken must be *crazy*," Sandy admitted. "But he's right-there's no doubt about it. I saw the thing myself. It's hanging a few inches above the grill, suspended on springs that stretch across the duct. The wires leading out of it seem to go through a small hole in the duct. If we could just see where they come out--"

"We can do that all right." Collins stuffed his handkerchief back into his pocket. "The crawl space above the office area is only about five feet high-just high enough to take our heating and ventilating ducts, along with electric cables and some of the plumbing -but it extends over all the offices. So it would be a cinch to run wires from that spot over my desk to any other part of the office building. And it ought to be a cinch to trace them too."

Without another word he led the way to a steep flight of iron stairs angling up along the cement wall that separated the office and factory

areas. The stairs ended at a catwalk that stood out from the wall like a narrow slatted shelf.

Their feet set the iron treads to clanging in the eerie stillness of the foundry. The air, especially as they moved upward, was hot and smelly. The big ventilating fans had already been shut off for the night.

Collins took a flashlight from a clip beside the door at the top of the flight of stairs and turned the door handle. "Everything is going to be filthy in here," he warned the boys. "And remember to duck." He opened the door, reached inside for a switch, and clicked it on. The rectangle of blackness behind the door took on a pale-yellow glow.

Collins went in first, crouching over to accommodate his height to the low space. Behind him the boys, also bent low to avoid the ceiling, blinked in an effort to accustom their eyes to the dimness. Bare bulbs hung from the low roof supports here and there, but they were separated by wide intervals, and the light they cast was broken into intricate shadow patterns by the snakelike electric cables, the ducts, and water pipes that gave the crawl space the feel of some fantastic forest.

"Watch yourselves," Collins cautioned, and started forward on a zigzagging path toward the front of the administrative building where his own office was located. "This is like trying to find your way inside a ball of tangled wool," he muttered.

Ken could feel his shirt sticking to his back in the close stillness. The smell of dust filled his nostrils.

The administrative building was not, he knew, more than fifty feet deep from front to back. But when they had walked that distance they were still obviously a considerable way from the front wall, because their course had taken so many turns.

But after another ten feet Collins stopped, looked carefully around, and murmured, "Should be getting close. My office must be just about beneath us now." He swung his flash in a slow arc, moved forward another few feet, and then stopped abruptly.

"Come here," he said quietly.

The boys moved up on either side of him. Collins' flashlight was focused on one of the many rectangular ducts in the crawl space-square-cornered metal pipes only a few inches from the floor. Just below the spot he was indicating, a round metal tube left the underside of the duct and ran down through the rough flooring.

Heedless of the thick layer of dust everywhere, the boys knelt down.

There was a small hole in the side wall of the duct-a hole through which emerged a thin plastic-covered cable consisting of two individual wires twisted together.

The flashlight in Collins' hand trembled slightly as he raised it to follow the wire. Taped to the duct, it traveled along it for half a dozen yards. Then the wire left the duct, bridged a narrow gap, and was secured on the far side of that to a steel supporting beam. It ran along the beam, taped snugly against it.

In a tight jostling group, too tense now to speak, they followed the wire.

Somewhere, Ken told himself-perhaps within a few feet of where they were at that moment-the wires would turn down toward the floor again and lead them, perhaps by way of another ventilating duct, into one of the offices of the plant.

Whose office? The answer to that question, so far as Ken was concerned, was still shrouded in complete mystery. As tensely as he was following the lead of Collins' flashlight, he was also running through in his mind all the employees he had met so far at the Brentwood Foundry and Casting Company.

Surely the man who listened in at the other end of the wires leading from Collins' office had to have a private office. And there weren't many such men in the small company. There was Clark, the chief accountant, Ken remembered. There was the sales manager, Golding-but Golding was often away on the firm's business, Bascom had said. There was Delman, the production manager, and Talbot, the purchasing agent. And of course there was Bascom himself. But Bascom's work kept him out of his office much of the day.

An explosive exclamation from Collins cut short Ken's futile speculations.

"We're licked!" Collins said. "He's beat us again. This is a dead end!"

CHAPTER X

THE PHANTOM ENEMY

Ken's first reaction to Collins' words was that the man must be mistaken. How could the wires they were following lead them to a dead end? Surely, he thought, nobody would go to the trouble of rigging up a microphone only to leave the ends of its wires in mid-air.

Even as Ken silently protested Collins' statement, he rounded a concealing support and saw the actual terminus of the wires. They didn't go down through the floor, as Ken had assumed they would. They entered what appeared to be a tiny radio chassis fastened to a girder up near the roof. The only wire that left the little contrivance was an ordinary connecting cord running to an electrical junction box a few feet away.

"I don't get it," Sandy muttered. "What is that thing?"

"A wired radio transmitter," Collins said. There was anger and frustration in his voice. "And we should have expected it, I suppose—considering how smooth this whole operation has been."

"A radio transmitter?" Ken repeated. "You mean it's a miniature broadcasting setup?"

"More or less," Collins said. "It picks up sounds from the microphone over these wires we've been following, and then transmits them over the regular electric wiring system of the building."

"You mean broadcasts them to the whole building?" Ken felt completely confused.

"Sure," Collins said. "That is, the sounds can be heard anywhere in the building, provided you've got a radio receiver tuned to the particular frequency of this transmitter and plugged into the electric system."

"Wow!" Sandy said softly. "What a trick! Why, the radio could be plugged in anywhere in the plant, couldn't it—in any room or cubbyhole that has an electric outlet? And you could move it around too—plug it in one place today and some place else tomorrow."

"Exactly," Collins said grimly. "And we thought those wires would lead us right to our man!"

Ken's mind raced in circles. Then he said quickly, "But maybe the transmitter itself can lead us to him, if we could find out where it was bought. Wouldn't it have a serial number on it—something that would identify it?"

"Not this one," Collins said. "It's been put together out of parts that can be purchased in any radio or television supply store. Most radio supply places even sell diagrams for gadgets like this. People use them

for house-to-garage hookups-oh, lots of things. No, tracing this transmitter through a store is out.”

Sandy, who had been listening to Collins’ explanation with quick nods that told Ken he understood the principles involved, now reached up and touched the tiny tubes of the device. “Warm,” he murmured. “Wouldn’t that mean-“

Collins touched them too. “Right. The thing probably is running right now-running constantly, twenty-four hours a day. Then, whenever the fellow who rigged it up happens to want to hear what I’m saying at the moment, he just plugs in his receiver and listens for a while.”

“Couldn’t we search all the offices now while they’re empty?” Sandy suggested. “If we could find the receiver we’d-“

Collins was shaking his head again. “It would be pointless. In the first place, the receiver probably is no bigger than an electric razor, and it would take us weeks to comb through the plant looking for something that small. But it probably isn’t left here at night, anyway. It probably goes home in our man’s pocket. No, we’re dealing with somebody who’s too smart to catch. He’s not going to get his hundred thousand, but we can’t stop him from ruining the company in revenge.”

He turned his flashlight abruptly away from the little metal contrivance which had destroyed their hopes. “Let’s get out of here,” he said. “I’ve still got to keep that dinner date.”

The sounds of their three pairs of footsteps on the metal stairs a few minutes later had the measured beat of a funeral march, Ken found himself thinking -a dirge for a thriving factory that had been murdered for one man’s greed. With no other weapon than a handful of photographs of the plans for Lew Collins’ new machine—

Ken’s thoughts crashed to a standstill before a question that reared up suddenly in the forefront of his mind. How had those plans been photographed?

With all the other questions they had been trying so desperately to answer that one had been temporarily forgotten. But now that they knew neither Caton nor Winters had taken the pictures, that whole part of the mystery remained unsolved.

With a couple of electronic gadgets and a few yards of wire the man had been constantly at Collins’ elbow without ever having to enter Collins’ office. But how had he obtained the photographs that—

Suddenly Ken’s mind made one of those leaps which always surprised him and which he could explain only by saying he had had a hunch.

The leap took him from the thought of listening to a conversation without seeing the speakers to the possibility of taking a picture

without seeing the subject. Would it have been possible? he asked himself. Could the extortionist have used some kind of long-range photographic device which put him inside the locked laboratory as effectively as the microphone put him in Collins' private office?

Ken had reached the foot of the stairs. Collins, ahead of him, started across the factory floor. But Ken stopped where he was—stopped so suddenly that Sandy, behind him, had to grab at the railing to keep himself from toppling forward on top of him.

"Mr. Collins," Ken said, "would it be all right with you if we spent a little more time up there?" As Collins looked around, surprised, Ken jerked his head toward the crawl space from which they had just emerged. "We were so busy tracing those wires," Ken pointed out hastily, "that we didn't pay much attention to anything else. But if we really studied the place we might find a clue—the end of a cigarette, or a handkerchief, or a scrap of paper—something that was dropped when the wires were being installed."

"Say!" Sandy said over Ken's shoulder. "That's right. We might. It's worth a try, don't you think, sir?"

"We know you can't stay," Ken hurried on. "But with the place empty like this it seems safe for us to look around, don't you think? I mean, it couldn't do any harm."

Collins still looked surprised. "There's nothing dangerous up there," he said slowly. "You'll get dirty and bump your head if you're not careful. But mostly it'll just be a tiring business, prowling around among those pipes. Still, if you think you want to try it"—he gestured them to join him—"come along and I'll introduce you to the night watchman. He'll have to know who you are if you're going to stay here. Otherwise," he pointed out, "you might have trouble leaving when you do want to leave. Ted is a careful chap."

The boys knew Ted Morris by name, if not by sight. His cousin, Sam Morris, owner of the Brentwood Jewelry Shop, had been very much involved in an adventure of the boys which they usually thought of as *The Mystery of the Iron Box*.

"Mmm," the night watchman said, nodding to them across Emily Hill's desk which he had taken over for the night. "Holt and Allen. I've heard Sam speak of you. And now you're doing a story about the plant—is that it?"

"That's it, Ted," Collins said briskly. "I've got to leave now, but they're going to wander around for a while longer, getting the-er-the feel of the place. They'll pound on the door there at the end of the hall when they're ready to leave the foundry section."

"Might not hear them right off," Morris pointed out, "if I'm making my rounds."

"That'll be all right, sir," Sandy assured him. "Well just keep

knocking until you do.”

“Right.” The man nodded. “I’m never gone from this spot for more than ten minutes, anyway. Now if you’ll just sign in.” He indicated the open book lying on the receptionist’s desk and Sandy bent over it. “Five twenty,” Morris added helpfully, after Sandy had set down his signature and was pausing briefly over the heading marked time in.

“How’s Kurowski?” Morris asked Collins as Ken put his own signature after Sandy’s.

“They’re going to operate some time this evening,” Collins told him. “He was conscious for a few minutes this afternoon and the doctor sent for me. But by the time I got there he’d blacked out again.”

Ted Morris shook his head. “Bad business. Hope you young men know better than to try to fiddle around with those ladders.”

“We won’t touch them,” Ken assured him.

They said good night to Collins and walked back down the hall with Morris, who reopened the door for them.

“Any idea how long you’ll be?” the watchman asked conversationally.

“Er-no, not really,” Ken admitted.

“Well, take your time. Seems to me a queer way to get the feel of a place-to wander around it when all the machines are stopped and nobody’s at work. But Sam always said you two were pretty smart, so I guess you know what you’re doing.” Morris shut the door on them, leaving them once more in the high-ceilinged foundry with its rows of huge silent machines.

“Sam Morris wouldn’t think we were so smart if he knew the fools we’d been making of ourselves the past couple of days,” Ken said, heading toward the iron stairway leading up to the catwalk. “And the idea I’ve got right now probably makes me the prize fool of all time.”

“You mean looking for clues?” Sandy asked.

“That’s not what I wanted to come back here for,” Ken told him. “I think our Mr. X is too smart to go dropping his handkerchief or his calling cards around.”

“But you said-“

“I know. I just didn’t have the nerve to tell Mr. Collins what I’ve really got in mind.” Ken stopped on the first of the iron stairs and turned to look at Sandy. “What do you think of the extortionist having planted some kind of an automatic camera up here, a camera that could take pictures through the ventilation grill in the lab?”

Sandy opened his mouth, shut it again, and then opened it once more. “Automatic camera? Where did you get an idea like that?”

“It’s just a hunch. But if he could hear with a microphone,” Ken hurried on, in response to Sandy’s skeptically lifted eyebrows,

“without ever being in

Collins’ office, why couldn’t he also see with a camera-without ever being in the lab?”

“They’re not the same thing,” Sandy pointed out dryly. “Just what kind of an automatic camera do you think-?”

Ken grinned, swung around, and started up the stairs. “That’s your department,” he said. “You’re the camera expert around here.”

“Hmm.” Sandy climbed halfway up the flight without speaking. Then he muttered, “Remote-control camera, huh? Well, why not? Why not?” he repeated more loudly. “Hurry up, will you? Let’s get going. This could be interesting-mighty interesting!”

They went into the crawl space through the same door they had used before. Ken took the flashlight from its clip beside the door as they entered and turned on the inside lights as Collins had done. Sandy stepped over the high threshold behind him, hunching his big shoulders, and pausing a moment to become accustomed to the maze of faint light and deep shadows ahead of them.

“Do you think you can find the area above the lab?” Sandy asked, automatically speaking in a half whisper. “So far as I’m concerned, this place is like one of those famous labyrinths people can never find their way out of.”

“I think I can.” Ken started forward in the crouched position the low ceiling demanded. “We headed this way, I think, before. And if we find the area over the office where the microphone is, we’ll be pretty close to the lab.”

Ken’s sense of direction didn’t fail him. Within a few minutes he was pointing the flashlight at the tiny hole in the duct which they had first discovered some half an hour before, the hole through which the wires emerged to run to the radio transmitter.

“Now,” Ken said quietly, “if we’re right above Collins’ desk, facing the front of the building, that means the door to the lab should be on our right-about six or seven feet.”

He stooped under an overhead pipe, past a steel upright, and then moved his flashlight in a careful circle. “Right around here some place should be the ventilating duct that has two openings leading down into the lab.”

“And there it is!” Sandy moved past Ken so quickly that he forgot to keep his head down and it struck a pipe with a resounding thud. “Ouch!” But Sandy was already kneeling in the dust alongside the rectangular duct that was raised only a few inches above the floor, peering beneath it to look for the outlets that went down into the room below.

“Here’s one!” he said a moment later. “Let’s have a close look down here.” And when Ken knelt beside him he went on, “There’d

have to be an opening cut into the duct to lower the camera through, an opening that's probably covered up now by some kind of a homemade cover to keep the duct more or less airtight." With fingers and a flashlight he was exploring the duct's grimy surface. "Got it!"

Ken looked at the spot on which Sandy had focused the light and saw a six-inch square of sheet metal fastened to the upper surface of the duct like a patch. A screw in one corner held it in place, and acted as a pivot on which the patch could be swung aside. The circular scratches on the duct, on either side of the patch, suggested that it had been moved back and forth many times.

"Don't touch it any more than you have to," Ken cautioned, trying to control the excitement that was mounting in him with every passing second. "Mr. X may not have thought to wear gloves up here."

Sandy nodded his understanding and took the pencil Ken handed him. Using it in place of a finger, he nudged the thin metal to one side. Beneath it was a black square opening, through which a current of warm air rose.

"See what you can see," Sandy told Ken. "You first, you dreamed this up."

Ken bent over the small hole. "It's so dark I can't see a thing," he said after a moment.

"Don't try to look down into the room," Sandy said impatiently. "Naturally that's dark. Here, take the flash and examine the inside of the duct itself."

Ken held the flash so that it pointed into the hole, and with his head close to it he looked again. "Nothing," he reported bleakly. "No camera-nothing but the grill in the ceiling, a circular one just like the one in--"

"Here, let me!" Sandy almost grabbed the light out of his hands. "Maybe the camera itself isn't there now," he said, edging Ken out of the way so that he could peer into the hole. "But now that we've found this patch up here you can't tell me there never was a camera in here-and if there was, we ought to be able to find some evidence of it. He'd have to screw it in place, and ..." Sandy's voice slowed to a halt. "You're right," he said quietly after a long moment. "There isn't a single mark here to indicate that a camera or anything else was ever fastened inside this thing."

They stared at each other over the yellow beam of the flashlight in Sandy's hand.

"Of course," Sandy said finally, "it doesn't have to have been an automatic camera, I suppose. If he could get up here often enough, he could bring the camera with him, shoot down through this hole, and--" He shook his head and drew a hand over his forehead, leaving a black streak there. "No, that's no good. He couldn't *live* up here. And how

else could he get a full set of pictures of the plans of the machine?"

Once more, grimly, he shone the flash into the hole. This time he thrust it far down into the duct, and squinted alongside the opening.

Suddenly he straightened. "One of the drafting tables is right beneath this duct," he said. "I could just see it down there. So if you did take a picture through here, aiming the camera right through the hole in the middle of the grill, you'd get a picture of part of the drafting table. That sounds hopeful. The only trouble is that it would be of only a part of the table. So even if that's what he did, even if he managed to get up here day after day, and take dozens of shots—"

Ken reached across the duct and grabbed Sandy's arm in a grip that made Sandy wince. "He didn't have to keep coming! Sure, he said he had pictures of all the plans—but do we have to believe him just because he said so? Do we?"

"Huh?" Sandy swallowed, and his black-streaked forehead wrinkled in an effort to follow Ken's sudden shift of thought.

"Look," Ken said, "all we ever saw—all Lew Collins ever saw, so far as we know—was one photograph showing part of one plan. Right? So maybe that's all there is! Maybe just one picture was taken, or at least just a few, say, of which only one was useful for Mr. X's purpose. It was all he needed. It did the job for him."

"You mean that his letter was a bluff? Another kind of bluff? I mean, not the kind we once laid to Jennings, when we thought he wouldn't go through with the threat."

"That's right," Ken agreed. "A bluff. Which would mean that Mr. X won't go through with the threat either—because he can't. He can't supply photographs of the machine's plans to other foundries, because all he's got is this one photograph!"

For another moment they looked at each other · without speaking. Then Sandy carefully pushed the metal patch over the hole with the pencil end and handed the pencil back to Ken.

"When we told Collins once before that he was being fooled—that he didn't have to worry—the thing backfired on us," Sandy said quietly. "But I don't think it will this time. I think this time we really hit it, Ken. Let's get over to the Caton house and give Collins something to celebrate!"

In their excitement they almost got lost trying to find the exit door, but they located it after a breathless few minutes. They were both grinning, hardly wanting to talk about their discovery for fear they might find a hole in it, as they let themselves out. They remembered to turn off the lights before they shut the door, and then they hurried down the slatted iron steps and crossed the foundry to the locked door.

Sandy pounded it.

“Wipe off your forehead,” Ken told him. “The watchman will think he’s seeing things if you come out looking like that.”

They waited impatiently, but Ted Morris didn’t arrive.

“He’s probably on his rounds,” Ken said finally.

Five minutes-and five loud knockings-afterward, the door finally opened.

“Sorry,” Ted Morris said calmly. “I told you I might be making my rounds. Get what you wanted-the feel of the place?”

“Yes, thanks,” Ken told him quickly. “Exactly what we wanted.” He was almost running down the hall toward the front door. “Thanks a lot, Mr. Morris. We’re in a hurry, so you don’t mind if we just take off, do you?”

“Most certainly do. Can’t leave until you’ve signed out,” Morris called after their fleeing figures.

“Oh, yes! Sorry-we forgot.” Ken skidded to a halt beside the receptionist’s desk, glanced at his watch, and scribbled his signature and the time, six twenty. Sandy signed right after him.

Then, with hasty thanks and good nights, they made their way out into the chilly October night.

“Brr!” Sandy said. “Glad we’ve got our topcoats in .the car.”

“The news we’re taking to Collins would keep me warm even if the temperature were zero,” Ken said cheerfully.

“I’ll drive.” Ken swung away from Sandy to go

Ken tried to pull the towering figure down around the left side of their convertible, standing alone now. He had to move carefully because the asphalt paving beneath his feet was as black as the starless sky overhead. A dim shape some distance ahead-Ted Morris’ car, Ken assumed-seemed to be the only other object in the whole big parking area, but in the darkness Ken couldn’t be sure he might not stumble over small parking guides he had failed to notice before. Finally he reached the door, opened it, and thrust his hand in to take his topcoat off the seat. That was when he realized that he was still carrying the flashlight.

He grinned, thinking that Ted Morris would be embarrassed to learn that he had permitted the boys to walk off the factory premises with property that didn’t belong to them. Ken slipped the light into his topcoat pocket. He would ask Collins to return it when he saw him.

He opened the car door then and slid beneath the wheel. “You coming?” he asked, realizing that Sandy had not yet joined him. “Hey!” he raised his voice. “Where are you, anyway? Did you get lost?”

He moved over on the seat, opened the far door, and leaned out. “Sandy!” he called.

He heard the swish of the descending blow even before he felt it.

Instinctively he rolled and twisted to one side so that the heavy object landed on his left shoulder near the neck. There was a single flash of pain and then an almost instant numbness.

Ken struggled to pull back into the car, but discovered that his left arm was useless and his right arm pinned against the back of the seat by his own weight. When he felt a grab at his shoulder, and a powerful heave, he could do nothing to resist it. He fell forward and down toward the pavement.

He landed heavily. But immediately he tried to roll to one side and get to his feet-to meet this invisible enemy face to face.

That crushing weight struck him again, then, this time right at the back of his neck.

Frantically, feeling his strength going out of him, Ken twisted the other way. He found his body up against a pair of legs that rose above him in the darkness.

With a great effort Ken flung his good arm out and around them, trying at once to pull himself up and to pull the towering figure down.

Then he was struck once more. The blow landed on his head. All the lights he had ever seen in his life seemed to flare up inside his head in a single brilliant blaze.

Then they faded, and there was nothing left but darkness.

CHAPTER XI

SAY IT WITH MUSIC

Ken returned *to* consciousness in slow surges. He felt as if he were a piece of driftwood being tossed about by waves riding up a beach. Each roller threw him a little higher toward dry land. Each succeeding undertow pulled him back into the deep water of unconsciousness-but not quite so far.

"I'm almost there," Ken thought drowsily.

Another wave, another undertow, another wave again.

He was safe now, Ken thought, and decided to open his eyes.

He blinked several times, seeing nothing. He blinked again, and continued to see only the blackness of closed lids. Finally he understood. He was in a place that was utterly, completely dark.

At the same moment he began to be aware that his head and his left shoulder were throbbing painfully. After that the physical sensations came fast. He knew his arms were pulled behind him in an unnatural and agonizing position, and that he couldn't move them.

He was conscious of his crossed wrists, pressing against each other. There was no sensation in his hands at all, and when he commanded his fingers to move he had no way of knowing whether they obeyed his will or not. His ankles were crushed together too, bone tight against bone. And he was lying down, half on his side, half on his back, on some hard surface. Where his cheek touched it, it felt rough. The stench of oil was thick in his nostrils.

Fragments of memory flitted through his mind. He and Sandy had been at the factory, up in the crawl space.

Could that be where he was now? Ken wondered. Then another bit of memory tumbled into place and he recalled that they had left-had signed out in the night watchman's book and gone to their car.

And that's where it had happened, Ken knew suddenly. He had been calling to Sandy, had reached over and opened the far door of the car to inquire the reason for Sandy's slowness-and something had struck him.

But where had Sandy been? Where was he now?

Had Sandy rescued him, after the final blow beyond which Ken could remember nothing? Had the big redhead tackled the owner of that pair of legs Ken recalled clutching, and downed him-and then taken Ken home? But why had Sandy tied him up like this?

"Sandy!"

But the word sounded only in Ken's mind. He couldn't form it with his mouth. Trying to call Sandy's name had gained him only the

knowledge that his lips were immovable-that any effort to use them resulted in a cruel pulling of his skin by the adhesive material that sealed them shut.

Bound, tied, helpless and in the dark-panic swept over Ken. He fought to open his mouth, convinced that he was suffocating. The agony of the attempt increased his fear. He made a convulsive effort to raise his head from the floor, to sit up. He tried to wrench his hands apart, and stopped only when the pain of the effort sent him plunging down once more to the border of unconsciousness.

His frenzied struggles ceased then. For long moments he drifted in a gray world, a semiconscious haze. Only gradually did clearheadedness return, but this time no panic accompanied it. He had accepted his helplessness. Determinedly he set himself to reason about it-not to waste his strength fighting something that couldn't be fought.

The five basic questions a reporter learns to answer in every story he writes suddenly presented themselves in the forefront of Ken's mind: Who, What, When, Where, and Why?

Who had attacked him? Who had brought him to this place? It was easy to answer, "The extortionist," but the answer, Ken knew, was meaningless. The identity of the extortionist was as much of a mystery as it had ever been. And at the moment, Ken told himself grimly, he was in no position to solve that mystery, or any other.

"All right, then," he told himself silently. "Go on to something you can answer. Try the next one: What?"

What had happened, so far as he himself was concerned, he already knew. He had been knocked out, tied up, and brought to the dark place he was now in. Had Sandy been knocked out at the same time? He didn't know and in his helpless condition he didn't see how he could find out.

Alarm for his friend drove Ken close to panic again, but he pulled himself back from the edge. To keep his mind away from that fear, he forced himself to survey more carefully his own person. Mouth bound shut, he recited inwardly. Hands fastened together behind his back-taped, by the feel of the binding. Ankles tied together-binding unknown. Head painful and throbbing. Left shoulder even more painful. Dull ache on left hip.

The last mental notation he made brought him to a pause. By now he could remember, pretty clearly, the various blows that had struck him-one on the shoulder, one on the back of the neck, one on the head. So there seemed no explanation for the pain in his hip. He knew that when he pitched out of the car onto the asphalt parking lot he hadn't struck his hip then.

With an effort Ken rolled over from his left side, on which he had been lying, to relieve the pain. The moment he no longer had his

weight on the hip, the pain ceased. Puzzled, Ken rolled back again-and the pain returned.

Grimly amused at the slowness of his own deductions, Ken realized then that there must be something in his pocket which hurt him when he lay on top of it. A moment later he nodded to himself in the darkness. The flashlight he had accidentally carried out of the plant with him was in the left pocket of his topcoat.

The knowledge that he possessed a flashlight was cheering, but only for an instant. Then the realization that he couldn't get at it, couldn't turn it on, washed over him like a wave of despair.

"Stop it!" Ken commanded himself, and forced himself to think instead of the third question in his list of five: When?

He knew when he had been knocked out. It had occurred within minutes of the time he and Sandy had signed out of the plant, and that was at exactly six twenty. How long a time had elapsed since then, Ken had no idea. He wondered if he still possessed his wrist watch and realized that even if he did, it was undoubtedly covered by the binding that held his wrists together.

Ken prodded himself on to the next question: Where?

He knew that he had been knocked out in the factory parking lot. But, again, the question of where he was at the moment would have to remain unanswered. The oily smell of the air he was breathing was familiar, but in itself it didn't prove anything.

There was one question left: Why?

With a brief thrill of satisfaction Ken told himself that he knew the answer to that. The extortionist must have grown panicky because he realized that Ken and Sandy had discovered his method and the fact that there were no teeth in his threat. Perhaps the man had been in the crawl space along with them, had heard them talking, and had determined then to get rid of them so that they couldn't stand in his way.

Suddenly Ken realized that in his mind he had used the phrase "get rid of them." What had he meant by that? he asked himself. Did he really think the extortionist meant to destroy Sandy and himself? Or did the man only want to dispose of them temporarily, until he could make his own getaway?

In either case, Ken decided, fighting panic again, he had to do something.

But what?

Forcing himself to calmness, he tested his bonds. The result was what he had feared. The more he strained against them, the tighter they seemed-and the more painful.

He could roll back and forth on his back. He could bend his knees.

But wait! he reminded himself. By rolling back and forth in a

certain way, he might be able to shift his topcoat around until he brought the left pocket within reach of his bound hands.

He tried. He tried again. Now his left pocket was almost directly beneath him, almost within reach of his numbed fingers.

Almost, Ken discovered. But not quite. No matter how strenuously he arched his back and strained his muscles, he couldn't bring his pocket into position directly beneath his immobilized hands.

Ken gave up trying and lay exhausted, his chest heaving and his head and shoulders pulsing in violent waves of pain.

The disappointment was bitter. In the back of his mind, as he struggled, had been the hope that if he could reach the flashlight and turn it on, he would discover Sandy somewhere near him.

Suddenly a new thought struck him. If Sandy was nearby, it should be possible to hear his breathing.

Ken forced himself to lie completely still, forced his own breath to come more and more slowly. Finally he could hold it for what seemed like long seconds at a time. His ears strained. But the only sound he could hear was the pounding of his own heart and-when he had held his breath as long as he could-the pounding of his pulse in his ears.

Reason told him that Sandy might be nearby, but no longer breathing.

Ken rejected the idea with all the strength of will he could muster.

He reminded himself that he had no idea of the size of the place where he was being held. Perhaps it was so large that another person in it might be too far away for his breathing to be audible to Ken. Slowly Ken began to edge his body to the left, pushing his bound feet in that direction first as a precaution. He could move only a scant inch or two at a time, and even that much progress required the straining of every muscle in his torso.

Suddenly his feet touched something-something that yielded slightly to the thrust of his toes.

Cautiously Ken rolled his whole body leftward. His forehead touched something this time-something solid but not hard, and faintly rough.

Ken knew it was cloth, knew it might be Sandy's coat.

He told himself he should lie still again and try once more to listen for the sound of a breath. But he was too impatient. He rolled to the right as hard as he could, and then rolled back again, so that this time his forehead came up against the object he had touched before with a tiny soundless thud.

Ken held his own breath. Then he tried again, rolling first to the right and then back, thrusting his head out so that he nudged more forcefully against that clothlike surface.

He was still touching it when it moved slightly.

Ken felt as if his heart had risen into his throat and was threatening to choke him behind the tape that bound his mouth. He straightened his neck and thrust his head to the left again, nudging that slightly resilient surface once more.

Then he heard it-a long, faint hissing sound, as if someone were taking a long shuddering breath.

Ken rolled on his back, oblivious of the pain of his full weight crushing his bound hands, raised his feet as high as he could, and brought them down with all his force on the floor. The pain that leaped instantly up his legs told him that the floor must be concrete, but he made himself raise his feet and bring them down again. Then he waited.

Did he imagine that he heard a slight sound, as of cloth against cloth, or perhaps of rubber soles against concrete?

A second later he knew that he had not imagined it, for a thud close beside him sounded in answer to his own. Then it sounded again.

Ken wanted to laugh out loud. Sandy was beside him! Sandy was there-and alive, responding to Ken's desperate effort to communicate.

Ken's mouth made the first movement of an involuntary smile, but searing pain paralyzed his face instantly. He tried to force his breath past the tape to make some kind of a sound. A faint humming resulted.

But humming was better than nothing. A moment later he was signaling Sandy the only way he knew how-with the wordless grunting hum of the first line of the old song "Hail, hail, the gang's all here!"

Had Sandy understood? Could he hear? Was he conscious?

Ken waited for what seemed like an eternity, and then with a wild rush of relief he heard the reply to his message-a series of grunts, each one a little stronger than the last. They told Ken, as clearly as words could have done, that Sandy was as helpless as himself, but that Sandy understood him.

For an instant Ken relaxed, worn out by the strain and the effort. Then he felt a mounting desire to communicate with Sandy again, to tell him that he possessed a flashlight.

With Sandy's help, he thought feverishly, the flashlight might somehow be removed from Ken's pocket and turned on. But how could he, without spoken or written words, convey to Sandy such an elaborate message-a message asking Sandy's help in removing from a pocket a flashlight Sandy did not even know was there?

If it were only possible to hum words instead of merely tunes!

Then the idea hit him. He and Sandy knew dozens of songs, old ones and new ones, popular songs and hymns-all the music they had

heard together during hundreds of hours of listening to Mom Allen playing the piano, of hearing music over the radio and television. And every word he could want to say to Sandy, Ken felt sure, appeared in some song or other. So if he could hum the right song and somehow persuade Sandy to concentrate on the right word in that song-

Ken took a deep breath, determined to try the unlikely scheme because he could think of no other. And immediately, as if it were a good omen, the old song "Say It with Music"-one of Pop's favorites-sprang into his mind.

That was what he needed! First he would tell Sandy that they could say it with music, and then—

Ken waited until he was sure he had the tune of the title line clearly in his mind, and then he hummed it as loudly as he could.

Would Sandy recognize it? Would he understand what Ken meant?

There was no response from the silent shape Ken could now so clearly sense beside himself. Ken hummed the line again.

A startled grunt came from Sandy, as if he had suddenly understood. And an instant later, in a muffled tone, Sandy hummed the line back. Immediately after it, before Ken could continue the exchange, Sandy repeated the first two tones-the notes that accompanied the words "Say it."

Good old Sandy! Again Ken's mouth started to form a grin before the pain stopped him.

Then, frantically, he set himself the task of finding somewhere in his memory a song containing the first word he wanted to convey to Sandy-the word "light." It came quicker than he had dared to hope. Within seconds he was humming the first phrase of the hymn, "Lead, Kindly Light." He broke off, started again, and this time he gave a special emphasis to the note for the word "light."

Sandy was silent for a moment. Then, in a tone that somehow managed to sound amazed, Sandy repeated Ken's line and he too emphasized the word "light."

Ken grunted in what he hoped Sandy would understand as an affirmative tone.

"Light in my pocket"-that was what he wanted to say. But what song contained that other vital word of the message, the word "pocket"? "Think," he told himself desperately. "Think of something."

Then he had it-an old nursery rhyme, and one that Mom often played for the little girl who lived next door to the Allen house-"Sing a Song of Sixpence."

Slowly, carefully, Ken hummed the tune that went with the words: "Sing a song of sixpence, A pocket full of rye ..."

He stopped abruptly, waited a brief moment, and then started over again, stopping this time on "pocket." After a second's wait he

repeated the same thing again, emphasizing once more the last two notes.

Sandy caught on in a fraction of the time it had taken Ken to think of the tune. Ken could feel Sandy's body edging closer to his own, until Sandy's fingers were actually tugging lightly at Ken's coat.

The realization that Sandy could move his fingers flooded Ken with renewed courage. As swiftly as he could, he maneuvered his body around so that the topcoat pocket with the flashlight in it was in the place where he had felt the touch of Sandy's fingers.

It was going to work! Ken could feel Sandy's fingers jab at the hard cylinder of the flashlight, could hear his grunt of pleased accomplishment. The fingers moved, groping for the pocket opening. Ken did his best to help, hunching himself slightly one way and then another, until he was sure Sandy's hands were directly over the opening. Then Ken thrust himself toward Sandy as hard as he could, hoping that the movement would bring Sandy's hands and the flashlight into direct contact.

Sandy grunted again, triumphantly this time. For long seconds Ken held his breath, not daring to move a muscle for fear he would disturb the delicate manipulation. He could feel the hard cylinder moving upward along his own hip, very slowly. Then he could no longer feel the cylinder at all.

A second later, with a faint click, the flashlight went on.

For a moment the beam waved erratically. Its movement and the brilliance of it after long darkness made it impossible for Ken to see anything at all. Then the light steadied and settled to one position, pointing straight upward, forming a yellowish circle on what appeared to be a concrete ceiling some ten feet above Ken's head. Ken turned sideways to look at it. The flashlight was standing upright on the floor, between Ken and the shape beyond it that was Sandy.

With one accord the boys pushed themselves up from the floor with their bound hands until they were seated upright, and could survey their surroundings.

Ken knew immediately where they were. Planted solidly on the floor only a few feet away from him was a big, black electric motor. The belts that ran up from it connected the motor to the huge fan set into one wall. The black opening in the opposite wall was the end of a big ventilating duct. And through that duct, at some undetermined moment in the future, would come the stifling heat and the dangerous fumes generated by the furnaces and the processes of molding molten metal.

When that fan was turned on, no human being would be able to survive in the small concrete cell that was one of the fanhouses attached to the rear wall of the Brentwood Foundry and Casting

Company.

CHAPTER XII

THE BENT BLADE

Above the white rectangles of tape that bound their mouths shut, the boys looked at each other. Even if they could have spoken, there was no need for words. Each of them could visualize with terrifying clarity what would happen when the foundry came alive for a new day-when a workman somewhere in the plant threw a switch and the great fan started to revolve.

Sudden hope leaped into Ken's mind. Surely he and Sandy would be found before that happened!

But the hope died as quickly as it was born. All too clearly he remembered that they had signed out of the plant under Ted Morris's eye. Undoubtedly, by now, their car had been driven to some place far away from the Brentwood Foundry and Casting Company. It was quite possible that Pop Allen, already worried over their absence, had checked at the plant and had been told in good faith that the boys had left there before six thirty.

No, the man who had waited for them at their car, knocked them out, tied them up and brought them to the fanhouse, had known exactly what he was doing-had known that there would be no chance of rescue for his victims until it was too late. With the same skill he had shown from the beginning, he had made certain that Sandy Allen and Ken Holt would be unable to disclose what they had discovered in the dusty crawl space above the laboratory.

Once more Ken reminded himself that he must think as calmly, as clearly as he could. Knowing that Sandy was alive and beside him should make that easier, he told himself-although it was not easy to bear the thought that Sandy too was in terrible danger.

What chances of survival were there? Ken asked himself grimly. The answer was there, waiting for him: either he and Sandy had to escape from the fanhouse before the fan was turned on; or they had to find some way of preventing the blades from spinning when the motor was switched on.

Could they escape?

Ken let his eyes sweep around the room, slowly, taking in every detail visible in the glow of the flash. There was nothing-nothing at all-that could be used as a tool to break their bonds. In fact the only two objects in the room that weren't bolted to the floor were Sandy and himself. And they might just as well have been bolted down, Ken thought despairingly. Hands bound together with what seemed to be tape, feet bound by-For the first time, in the light of the flash, Ken

realized that the binding holding his ankles together was his own belt, pulled painfully tight by its big Mexican silver buckle.

It was the sight of that buckle that quelled Ken's rising panic. Smudged and streaked with oil as it was, it still winked at him in the yellow glow of the light, as if to remind him of the desperate plight he and Sandy had once found themselves in in Mexico. Calm and courage had restored them to safety that time. Calm and courage, Ken told himself, was what they needed now.

He looked over at Sandy and did his best to convey the idea that he would be grinning cheerfully, if it were possible to grin at all beneath the tape that covered his mouth. Sandy looked back at him for a moment and then he winked. He winked a second time, more broadly, and an instant later he began to hum.

As soon as Ken realized what his friend was doing he bent all his concentration on the sound.

Almost instantly Ken recognized Sandy's tune. It was the spiritual "Hand Me Down My Walking Cane." Sandy hummed only the first line of it. Then he repeated that line, and put a strong emphasis on the first note. To make sure Ken understood him he went through the line a third time, again with the same emphasis.

"Hand," Ken said to himself blankly. An instant later he saw that Sandy had twisted his body around so that Ken could see his bound hands-and that Sandy's strong fingers were able to move with considerable freedom.

Once more Sandy hummed the same phrase, with the same emphasis. Ken understood him completely: Sandy's fingers were free enough to work at the bindings on Ken's hands.

Swiftly Ken wriggled his body around until his back was facing Sandy's back, his hands within reach of Sandy's. Immediately Sandy set to work.

Ken could feel the redhead's fingers exploring the edges of the tape. Sometimes the sensation was sharply painful, as a fingernail sought to slide under the adhesive stuff. Sometimes the sensation set up a violent itching, as if tiny stinging insects were crawling over Ken's hands. And sometimes Sandy worked for long minutes and Ken could feel almost nothing at all, because the extremities of his own hands were numbed.

Ken did all he could to help, twisting himself this way and that in instinctive response to Sandy's efforts to find a more hopeful spot for probing. Perspiration broke out on Ken's forehead and face. His hands grew slippery with perspiration too, and Sandy's fumbling efforts became more fumbling still.

Finally, when Ken realized that Sandy was trying uselessly to tear the tape binding through, he knew that this attempt at freeing

themselves had ended in a failure. He let himself slump sideways to the floor for a moment's rest.

Sandy accepted the verdict. Hands, arms, and neck muscles straining from the futile effort, he too let himself fall over into a defeated huddle.

They were still lying side by side when the church bell began to toll. Rigid, holding themselves tense, they counted the slow, deep-throated notes that marked off the hours and half-hours for all of Brentwood day in and day out.

The bell tolled five times.

With a convulsive jerk Ken pulled himself upright. He had had no idea that he and Sandy had been unconscious through most of the night-that morning was already upon them. Desperately he tried to remember at what hour the foundry started work in the morning, but realized he was completely ignorant on the subject. The foundry workmen might arrive at seven, seven thirty, eight or even later. But the furnaces might be put in operation hours earlier, so that a supply of molten metal would be ready for use. All they did know was that-as old Ben Kurowski had said-the fans were turned on "first thing in the morning."

Ken wriggled around on the floor, nudging at Sandy as he did so. Soon they were able to see each other's faces, glistening in the circle of yellow light, and both pale with the realization that within a short time-perhaps no more than an hour-the fate that had been so carefully prepared for them would begin to take its deadly effect. At that very moment, for all they knew, heat might be already building up in the furnaces below.

Suddenly Sandy hoisted himself to a sitting position again, and once more he hummed the spiritual. He was ready for another attempt at freeing Ken's hands.

Automatically Ken too pushed himself up and started to turn around to bring his bound wrists into position. Then he stopped. He knew Sandy had made no progress on the first try. A second try probably would be equally useless-would almost certainly do nothing but consume precious time. Ken shook his head.

If they couldn't escape from the fanhouse, he asked himself, could they possibly prevent the fan from turning?

Sandy was looking at him, puzzled. Ken showed him what was in his mind by inching himself painfully across the concrete floor until his feet were close to the fan motor. He kicked the heavy black object. After several kicks hard enough to hurt his feet, he looked over at Sandy and raised his eyebrows.

Sandy understood his question: Could they injure the motor?

And Ken understood the answer signaled by Sandy's despairing

shake of the head and a shrug of his shoulders. If it was possible to injure the motor at all, Sandy had no idea of how it might be accomplished.

Awkwardly Ken lifted his feet, barely preventing himself from toppling backward by bracing against his hands, and pushed the soles of his shoes against the four V belts that connected the electric motor to the fan. He knew he had no chance of breaking through the tough material. But he had hoped that he might, with effort and luck, force the belts out of their grooved pulleys so that the motor would become disconnected from the fan itself.

After a few seconds he gave up abruptly. The grooves were far too deep. Even with both hands free, he realized, he would not be able to move the pulleys unaided.

Next, he squirmed around to the other end of the motor where he assumed its heavy wires were connected. But he saw immediately that no wires were visible. Presumably they were enclosed inside the pipe that ran up from the floor directly into the motor. There was no opportunity at all for damaging the wires in any way.

Swallowing his despair, Ken looked at the fan itself-the only part of the dangerous apparatus he had not yet examined closely. It would not be very difficult to destroy it, he knew-if only they had some weapon to work with. But they had nothing-nothing at all.

Ken twisted around toward Sandy. And again hope suddenly came alive in him at the sight of the intent look on Sandy's face.

The redhead was staring past Ken at the fan, his eyes narrowed, his whole body tense with concentration.

Ken had seen that look on Sandy's face before. Once, when he had tried to describe it to his friend, Sandy had laughed and said, "Oh, you mean my full-throttle thinking look."

How long Ken watched that look now he couldn't tell. It might have been seconds. It might have been minutes. Only when he saw Sandy nod slightly, as if he approved of some decision he had reached, did Ken allow himself to draw a full breath.

Sandy looked at him then and jerked his head sideways to indicate that Ken was to move away from the fan. Ken obeyed as quickly as his bonds permitted. Then he watched Sandy roll and squirm himself into a position on his back-as flat on his back as his bound hands allowed. Sandy's long legs extended past the belts to the fan itself. When he shifted his position slightly he could raise his bound feet off the floor and rest them on the tip of one of the downward pointing blades.

Sandy lay still for a moment, feet against the blade. Then he bent his knees, hunched himself a dozen inches closer to the fan, and slowly began to push with the soles of his feet.

The blade was made of heavy sheet iron, but even so it yielded

slightly under the pressure exerted upon it by Sandy's powerful leg muscles. The bottom edge of it moved out of line with the edges of the other blades.

Ken's eyes were wide with excitement now. He knew that if Sandy could bend the blade far enough out, it would fail to clear the metal supports that held the fan in place. And if one blade caught when the fan was turned on, the fan would either be stopped completely or it would set up enough noise to be heard even in a busy foundry.

Then Sandy relaxed, and the blade came back almost to its original position. It was still very slightly out of line with the other blades, but not nearly far enough to bring it into contact with the cross of metal bars on the fan's opposite side.

Ken wriggled toward his friend. Laboriously he got himself into position at Sandy's side, lying on one arm as Sandy was forced to do. His feet too were raised from the floor until they rested against the edge of the broad-tipped fan blade. His knees were hunched. He was ready to push.

Sandy gave the signal with a grunt. Together the boys thrust with all their might against the curved piece of metal. A fraction of an inch at a time it moved outward. Breathing heavily, exerting all their combined strength, they continued to thrust against the blade.

Farther and farther it moved, until Ken was positive that it projected beyond the supports.

Suddenly the boys' shoulders began to slip backward on the greasy concrete floor. There was no way they could stop themselves. Once started, their whole bodies moved back, away from the fan. Their pressure on the blade relaxed. They dropped their trembling legs to the floor. And the fan blade sprang back again.

It was bent. There could be no doubt of that. But it wasn't bent nearly enough to put a halt to the smooth functioning of the fan.

Ken and Sandy turned their heads sideways so that they could look at each other. Each of them tried to signal encouragement to the other. They had proved that the blade could be bent. It was only a question of time, now, until they could bend it as far as was necessary.

Grimly they got themselves shoved forward into position again.

This time they slipped even more quickly than they had before.

The church bell tolled once for the half hour, as they lay quiet a moment, fighting for breath now. They started to look at each other again, but they turned away before their eyes met.

Time was passing. How much more of it would they have?

Once more, breathing heavily, Sandy started to hunch himself forward into position for another try.

Ken didn't join him. Instead he had twisted around and was trying to gauge the distance to the other wall -the wall through which the

ventilating duct emerged.

The room, he felt sure, was considerably less than twelve feet from wall to wall. That meant that if his body and Sandy's were stretched out on it end to end, they would not be able to lie flat-they would have to hunch up to accommodate themselves.

That was just what he wanted to know. Quickly he swung his whole body around on a flat arc, until his feet touched the other wall. Then he inched over until his shoulders nudged Sandy's. The touch brought Sandy's head around and he saw what Ken had in mind. A sudden light came into the redhead's sweat-bleared eyes. Raising his shoulders slightly from the floor, he fitted them against Ken's shoulders, also slightly raised. Now their bodies formed a straight line across the room. Ken's feet were pressed flat against one wall. Sandy's feet were still pressed to the blade of the fan. Ken's body lay flat and taut, except for his raised shoulders. Sandy's knees were sharply bent. Their positions were such that Sandy could not slide back-could not unbend his knees and straighten out-without either pushing Ken through a concrete wall or bending the fan blade outward.

Ken couldn't see what Sandy was accomplishing, as he applied all the strength he had to the metal fan blade. Ken could only feel Sandy's shoulders jammed against his own, and sense the quivering of Sandy's muscles.

Shoulder against shoulder, the pressure held. It took all Ken's own strength to keep himself rigid-not to crumple and bend under the force Sandy was exerting on him. He felt as if Sandy's very bones were grating against the bones in his own shoulders.

Abruptly the pressure on Ken relaxed. He was aware that the upper part of Sandy's body had slid sideways to the floor. Ken's own head fell back. He rolled over as quickly as he could. Sandy lay limp and exhausted. But the look in his eyes was triumphant. Ken's own eyes flew to the fan. The end of the blade against which Sandy had been pushing was now bent so far outward that it extended several inches past the line of the supports.

Unless the heavy metal snapped off when the fan began to turn, the bent tip would stop the mechanism before it completed a single full revolution.

Beside him, Sandy was humming, between panting breaths, a ragged version of "Glory, Glory Hallelujah!" Weak with relief Ken joined in.

The light from the flash grew noticeably paler. Its battery was failing. But neither of the boys made any effort to turn it off and save what little of its strength remained.

There was nothing more they could do now. They both sat up after a few minutes, side by side, glancing at each other occasionally. Every

ache in their bruised and weary bodies was sharp and throbbing, every nerve strained for the first sound of the motor humming into life. After the frenzied activity of the past hour or more, their enforced waiting was agony, but it was an agony they could not avoid.

The church bell tolled six. The light of the flash had dwindled to a tiny red glow in the darkness. The boys could no longer see each other's faces. But now they could see the shape of the fan-its blades had become black silhouettes against the faint grayness of the morning outside the concrete cubicle.

Suddenly, from the direction of the duct outlet, came faint unrecognizable noises. Both boys started, aching muscles leaping against their bonds. The noises told them that the morning's activity was beginning in the plant below their prison. At any moment now some hand would throw the switch that controlled the huge fan, and they would know whether their desperate stratagem had succeeded or not.

The test came even sooner than they had expected. Almost immediately the big black motor close beside them began to hum. Instinctively the boys drew back from it. Then, quickly, they both looked at the fan.

Slowly its blades began to move.

Clang! Metal reverberated against metal. The bent blade had struck a metal support. It halted there.

The boys held themselves taut and breathless. They could sense the power of the motor surging through the belts toward the immobile fan. It seemed impossible that that power could be frustrated by a single piece of metal. It seemed only too likely that the bent blade would snap off and that the fan would then begin to turn swiftly, sucking into the room a body of air that would grow rapidly hotter and more heavily laden with gases.

The humming of the motor grew louder. Its pulleys squealed against the motionless belts. The smell of burning rubber reached the boys' nostrils. In a moment the acrid stench seemed to fill their lungs.

Then the humming stopped-the squealing stopped. Deafening silence suddenly surrounded them.

A long minute passed, and then another.

There was a click of a light switch and an unshaded bulb blinded them with its glare of hot light. An amazed voice spoke from the open doorway. "What in the blazes are you two doing here?"

CHAPTER XIII

TELLTALE FINGERPRINTS

The tolling church bell, whose notes for the hour of six had seemed so ominously loud when Ken and Sandy were bound and helpless, marked off the hours of seven and eight unheard by either of the boys.

At seven o'clock, exhausted and aching in every muscle, the boys were being driven home by a grim-faced Collins and an equally grim-faced Pop Allen, who had both been summoned to the plant by the boys' foundryman rescuer. Collins and Pop Allen had been in constant touch all night, ever since the boys had failed to return home for dinner. But the search for Ken and Sandy had been concentrated on the opposite side of Brentwood, where their abandoned red convertible had been found by one of Chief Kane's regular patrols.

At eight o'clock Ken and Sandy, raw wrists and ankles bandaged, were gulping down huge breakfasts under Mom's worried eyes. The doctor who had just examined them had assured Mom Allen that they would both be fit again after a few days' rest, and she was being insistent that they must go to bed the moment they finished eating. Ken and Sandy were being equally insistent, between mouthfuls, that they couldn't possibly rest until after a meeting that was going to take place in Lew Collins' office almost immediately.

They didn't tell Mom that the meeting would be a last desperate attempt to identify the brutal extortionist who had so far outwitted them at every turn. But she gave in finally when she realized that sleep was impossible for them until the mysterious meeting they mentioned had taken place.

They had already helped draw up the list of people Collins was summoning to that meeting. Police Chief Kane was among them, and so was Collins' secretary, Gloria Harris, because it had been agreed that a stenographic record should be made of every word spoken during the session. Jennings' name was on the list too. The other names were those of the six men who had their own offices in the administrative section of the plant building-the men who had the privacy needed to make use of the dictaphone. They were Don Bascom and the plant's department heads -Clark, the chief accountant; Golding, the sales manager; Delman, the production manager; Talbot, the purchasing agent; and Gibbons, the chief estimator.

Collins called the hospital before they left the Allen house. Ben Kurowski had regained consciousness during the night, and Collins had talked to him briefly in the early hours of the morning. Now, turning away from the phone, Collins nodded. "He's going to be all

right.”

Collins' car, Pop's and Andy Kane's, pulled into the parking lot in that order at seven minutes before nine. The occupants of all three were behind the closed door of Collins' inner office two minutes later. At exactly five minutes after nine Gloria Harris opened the door and put her head inside. "They're all here, Mr. Collins," she said quietly.

The outer office, except for the seven men seated in it, looked as it always had. Gloria Harris prided herself on its neatness and on the fresh flowers she kept in a vase on one small table. The flowers were there today too, and the row of magazines on the larger table were in their usual perfect order.

But the seven men gave the room an air of tenseness. And all seven pairs of eyes widened when Lew Collins ushered his companions into the room ahead of himself. Ken, trying to study each of the seven faces for some sign of guilt and fear, could see nothing in any of them except surprise and puzzlement. But none of the seven spoke while the group who had entered with Lew Collins seated themselves.

Bert, Pop, and Andy Kane joined Jennings on the long leather couch. Sandy took a straight chair which Gloria Harris had brought in from another office and placed beside the magazine table. Ken sat on a second straight chair beside the smaller table. Only Collins remained on his feet, beside his secretary's desk.

Collins was clearing his throat when Jennings spoke.

"This is pretty highhanded of you, Collins," he declared brusquely. Jennings' narrow dark face looked angry, and he held his thin figure stiffly. "I'd like to hear an explanation of being called here without warning-and an explanation as to why reporters and a police officer are present at what I took for granted would be a discussion of company affairs."

"You'll understand very shortly why these people are here," Collins replied. "And in good time."

"Now you look here!" Jennings interrupted. "As chairman of the board I insist--"

Collins interrupted in his turn. "Mr. Jennings, I doubt very much that you will remain chairman after the next meeting of the board. Having shown your complete lack of faith in the company by selling your stock, you will naturally be regarded by the other board members as unsuitable to sit with them at all."

"Sold his stock!" Golding, the sales manager, was staring first at Jennings, then at Collins. "Say, that is a surprise!"

"Several things you hear this morning will be surprising to most of you," Collins said, leaning against Gloria's desk. "For example, I think only two of you have known that this company recently received an extortion demand for a hundred thousand dollars, backed with a

threat of supplying photographs of the plans of our new machine to other foundries all over the world.”

“An extortion demand!” That was Bascom, the look of amazement on his face now sharpened.

“Did you say a hundred thousand dollars, Lew?” The startled questioner was Clark, the chief accountant.

“Exactly. Chief Kane is here,” Collins went on, “to take the extortionist into custody and to charge him at the same time with assault against three persons -assault with what must be considered deadly intent. The guilty man,” he added slowly and distinctly, “is here in this room at this moment. The purpose of this meeting is to identify him.”

Again Ken was searching the faces around him. Amazement now had given way to blank horror and shock. On every face those two emotions showed plainly. On no face was there the slightest evidence of guilt.

Gibbons, the chief estimator, seemed to find his voice first. “Great heavens, Lew!” he protested. “Somebody in this room guilty of extortion-of deadly assault! Surely you’re not serious! Why, this sort of thing can’t have been going on in the plant without our knowing about it.”

“One of you knew about it, of course,” Collins said grimly. In brief succinct phrases, then, he told of the arrival and contents of the first extortion letter and the decision of the board-prodded by Jennings-to sell the plant to Albourn and to pay the extortionist out of Albourn funds. Collins also explained frankly his own action in seeking help from the Allens and Ken Holt, in the hope of saving the plant for its Brentwood stockholders and employees.

“Ken and Sandy discovered for me,” he went on, without going into details, “the method by which Mr. Jennings knew each move I was making.” Suddenly he turned to Jennings. “Would you care now to name for us, Jennings, of your own free will, the person you employed to spy upon me?”

Jennings’ face was a furious red. His voice was shrill. “I’ll sue you for that! I employed nobody to spy on you! If you’re referring to the fact that I knew you were bound and determined to get help on this extortion business-that you were actually thinking of taking it to Chief Kane as a hypothetical case-” Jennings broke off and gave a short scornful laugh. “I didn’t need a spy to tell me stuff like that, Collins. Anybody who knows your fool attachment to this measly little plant could have guessed just what you’d want to do.”

Collins smiled faintly. “It’s interesting to have a public statement of exactly how you feel about this plant, Jennings. But I actually had no intention of talking to Chief Kane about any hypothetical case. I

referred to such a possibility only over the telephone once, at Ken and Sandy's request. It was part of the trap to catch your spy system at work. And you fell into the trap very neatly."

There was utter silence in the room for a few moments. Jennings' face paled slowly. At last, looking down at the floor and speaking in a voice that was barely audible, he said, "All right. I might as well tell you all I know. I've received two strange phone calls in the past few days. One told me you were going to have those two"-he pointed toward Ken and Sandy-"investigate the extortion case. The other-well, I don't have to go into that. You already know what was said that time. Naturally I got hold of you immediately on both occasions, simply because I had the best interests of the company at heart."

"Naturally." Collins' jaw tightened in a sudden flash of anger. "And when Alborn wouldn't buy the plant after all, you thought it would be for the best interests of the company if you told a few lies so you could unload your stock on-" With an effort he brought himself to a halt. "But that's beside the point at this moment. What we want you to tell us now, Jennings, is the name of your informant."

"I don't know who it was," Jennings muttered. "The voice was muffled-a kind of whisper."

"The man is a criminal, Jennings," Collins said sharply. "Are you willing to be regarded as his accomplice for shielding him?"

"Blast it, Collins!" Jennings had gone red again and now he looked Collins in the eye. "You and I don't agree-never have. You think I shouldn't have sold my stock to those two young men. Well, go ahead and think so. You can't recognize a stroke of smart business when you see it. Your idea of a good businessman is a sentimental idiot who worries more about the welfare of his employees than making money for the stockholders. I have more sense. But if you think I'd shield a man who tried to collect a hundred thousand dollars by outright theft, you're mistaken, that's all."

Ken felt his heart sink. They had counted on Jennings being able to point an accusing finger at one of the men in the room, once Jennings was convinced that the person who gave him information about Collins was also guilty of actual crimes.

"Now I want to know what all this wild talk is about assault," Jennings was hurrying on, as if eager to shift interest from himself. "Who were assaulted -and why?"

"We are coming to that right now," Collins said quietly. "Ben Kurowski was assaulted, for one."

"Kurowski assaulted!" Bascom sounded incredulous. "But I thought it was understood his ladder accidentally slipped."

"That's what the guilty party hoped we would think," Collins said. "And we did-until Kurowski became conscious."

Delman, the production manager, leaned forward. "You mean he told you who tried to kill him?"

Ken, watching the man closely, was also aware out the corner of his eye that Andy Kane's hand was directly over the open holster flap of his pistol. And Chief Kane now spoke, for the first time since he had entered the room.

"If Kurowski had told us," he said grimly, "we wouldn't be putting you all through this unorthodox session this morning. We'd have the guilty man under lock and key right now. Unfortunately the old chap didn't see anything but a stick pushing against the bottom rung of his ladder-pushing hard enough to topple the ladder over and bring Kurowski down with it."

"But why Kurowski?" The question was from Talbot, the purchasing agent.

"Because," Collins said, "Kurowski announced, the night before last, that he was going to start his regular fall checkup of the air ducts over this part of the building yesterday."

Jennings snorted. "This whole thing simply doesn't make sense. What have air ducts got to do with anything? And I thought you said originally that three people were assaulted. Who are the other two?"

"Ken Holt and Sandy Allen," Collins answered, gesturing toward the boys. "They'll explain to you what air ducts have to do with this situation. It's their story. They're the ones who figured it out. Go ahead, Ken."

Ken cleared his throat, conscious of what his choice of words during the next few minutes would mean. He started slowly, feeling his way, presenting only the most pertinent facts-the discovery of the microphone in Collins' office, the tracing of the wires that led so disappointingly to a transmitter, the conclusion that the guilty man must be someone who had a private office in the plant, where he could eavesdrop on Collins in safety.

Everyone in the room had listened in rigid silence up to that point. But Gibbons, the chief estimator, spoke up suddenly when Ken paused for breath.

"Lew," he said desperately to Collins, "this is all nonsense! You must know it is. Thinking one of us could have done this thing-why, it's incredible! In the first place, not a one of us is in his office long enough every day, alone, to be able to use this radio receiver stunt young Holt here has been describing. Take me, for example. You know yourself that I'm out in the plant hours every day-have to be, to make up my estimates."

His words released a flood of similar declarations.

"I'm certainly not in my office much," pointed out Golding, the sales manager. "We wouldn't have an order a month if I were."

"And I'm in the foundry more than I'm in my office," Delman the production manager said. "So's Bascom here."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Bascom told him. "I can say the same for Talbot, of course," he added, looking toward the purchasing agent. "And as for-" He glanced at Clark, the chief accountant, and then he fell awkwardly silent.

"That's right," Clark said quietly. "I am in my office almost continuously. But, Lew, I assure you-" His earnest face was drawn into taut lines.

Golding spoke again. "Don't be foolish, Clark. You're in your office, yes-but so are most of the rest of the staff. Everybody wanders in and out of your place all day."

Collins was holding up his hand. "If you'll let Ken go on," he said, "you'll understand that the man who listened in to what went on in my office didn't necessarily have to be in his own office nearly as much as we originally thought."

"That's right." Ken took up the story at a nod from Collins. "It was Sandy who realized that the man probably had a tape recorder connected to his receiver-a tape recorder that he could keep running all day, simply by using large rolls of tape and playing them at the slowest speed. That way he'd only have to be in his office once every couple of hours in order to change the rolls. If the man who worked out such a system had been able to figure out an equally successful way of taking photographs of the machine plans," Ken added, "he probably wouldn't have attacked Sandy and me last night and given himself away."

Ken paused. But he knew immediately the trick hadn't worked. His last few words, so carefully chosen, had produced not the slightest gesture or expression that revealed guilt. Only blankly incredulous faces stared back at him.

Ken took a deep breath. He was going to have to spin the story out to its very end and hope for the best.

Grimly he went ahead. "You see, we discovered how he made the pictures too-and why he could make only a few, perhaps only the single one he sent with the extortion demand."

As briefly as possible, then, Ken outlined the deductions he and Sandy had made while in the crawl space above the laboratory. "So when we found out that he couldn't carry out his threat-the threat of mailing complete plans of the machines to other foundries-we made ourselves dangerous to him," he went on. "Because once we'd told Mr. Collins that, then there would be no reason why the police shouldn't be called in and the guilty man tracked down. What we didn't realize, of course, was that the man must have been in the crawl space when we were, and close enough to overhear us talking. He must have made

up his mind immediately to get rid of us by leaving us in one of the fanhouses until we were killed by the heat and the fumes. But he waited until we left the plant before he knocked us out. That way, he hoped, no one would find us until it was too late.”

“And then he carried you-unconscious-to one of the fanhouses?” Talbot was staring at Sandy and speaking directly to the big redhead. “I simply don’t believe it. There isn’t a man in the room who could carry you up one of those ladders. Why, you must weigh over two hundred pounds.”

“I do,” Sandy told him. “But there’s an overhead hoist out in the foundry, you know. I think you people use it for unloading freight cars. Last night, apparently, it was used to lift Ken and me up to the fanhouse door when the watchman was making his rounds in the other end of the building.”

Sandy was idly fingering a heavy glass ash tray on the table beside him, as if unaware of what he was doing. But Ken knew that that ash tray could become a weapon in Sandy’s hand within a split second, if one of the men in the room suddenly revealed himself as a dangerous enemy.

Would the guilty one among them now show his true colors? The next minute or two would answer that question.

Ken looked at Collins. Collins nodded slightly.

“Using that hoist was one more example of the cleverness of this man who has been threatening the existence of your company,” Ken said slowly. “In fact, he’s so clever that it will probably come as a surprise to him now to hear that he made just one mistake.”

Ken paused. The only sound in the room was the faint scratching of Gloria Harris’ pencil as she set down the last words Ken had spoken.

“When he found he didn’t have enough of the adhesive tape he was using,” Ken said after a moment, “he used my own belt to fasten my ankles together. Perhaps he just didn’t notice that the belt has a big silver buckle-the kind of buckle that can take fingerprints very well.”

Again Ken stopped speaking. Now the silence in the room was complete. Nobody stirred. Nobody spoke.

Ken’s heart was thudding heavily in his chest. “So if there are no objections,” he said finally, “Chief Kane would now like to take the fingerprints of each one of you.”

When Bascom got to his feet, from a chair near the door, the movement brought every eye in the room to his face. “I’m certainly willing to have my prints taken,” he said.

Then Ken saw it-saw the automatic in Bascom’s hand.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TRICK THAT WORKED

"Look out!" Ken half shouted the warning. "He's got a gun!"

"Don't move-any of you." Bascom took a single step sideways to bring himself within reach of the doorknob. The weapon in his hand moved in a small arc that covered everybody in the room. "Kane," he added, "take your gun out with your left hand-left, I say!-and drop it on the floor. Do it slowly. I don't like sudden gestures." Amazingly, the smile on his face seemed as genial as the one with which he had greeted the boys on the evening of the Halloween party that now seemed so long ago.

After an endless moment, Kane's pistol thudded softly onto the carpet.

"And now slide it over to me-use your foot. That's it." Bascom bent swiftly, his gun never wavering, picked up the police chief's pistol, and slipped it into his pocket as he straightened up.

Ken could sense Sandy's fingers closing on the heavy ash tray, but he knew Sandy didn't dare throw it. In that crowded room even a badly aimed bullet could easily find a mark.

"Of course it's too bad about that fingerprint," Bascom said coolly. "But where I made my real mistake was in trying to do a professional piece of work with the help of an incompetent amateur." He looked scornfully at Jennings.

"You accuse me of helping you!" Jennings' voice cracked on the last word. He half rose to his feet.

"Sit down," Bascom told him disgustedly. "Don't worry, Jennings. Everybody knows you're too spineless to step over the line of legality-not that you don't come pretty close to it with some of the stunts you've pulled. My mistake was thinking you were at least sharp enough to cinch that deal with Alborn you've been after all these years, once I had it all set up for you by demanding that hundred thousand. Of course I couldn't let you know what I was doing-taking the picture and rigging the microphone to keep tabs on Collins. But naturally I thought when the whole setup was handed to you on a platter, you'd be able to take advantage of it and get us both what we wanted." He laughed suddenly. "You know it'll serve you right if Collins' new machine lifts this outfit into the big time-now that you've squeezed your way out of it."

Instantly he sobered. "But why am I wasting time? I've got to get out of here." His glance, flicking constantly around the circle of figures settled briefly on Gloria Harris. "And I guess I'll take Miss

Harris with me-just in case you have any dreams, Chief, of setting up roadblocks at the edge of town. Don't worry, Miss Harris," he went on. "I won't need you for more than half an hour. Then I'll be safely on my way. And I'm sure all these gentlemen will put your safety ahead of half an hour of freedom for me. Shall we go, Miss Harris?"

Slowly the gray-haired woman put down the pencil she had ceased to use when Ken uttered his cry of warning moments earlier. She placed it precisely alongside her notebook. Without looking at anyone directly, she let her eyes circle the room once-the room where she had worked faithfully for so many years. Her face was paper-white. Her eyes looked frightened. But as she got stiffly to her feet and started to move around her desk, on the side opposite to where Lew Collins stood, she said calmly, "I'll need my hat and coat."

"So you will," Bascom agreed courteously. His eyes were flicking more rapidly now, watching the moving figure of Miss Harris and watching everyone else too. "We wouldn't want people wondering why you are leaving the building without them, would we? Where are they?"

Her voice was still steady. "Right behind you on the coat tree."

"All right. You come and get them," Bascom told her.

Ken's admiration for what she had tried to do-for her effort to make Bascom turn away for one instant -was only equaled by the strength of his realization that the situation was hopeless. Bascom was too clever to reach for the coat himself.

But wait! Ken caught his breath as he suddenly saw that Miss Harris would shield Sandy from Bascom's sight for a moment as she walked across the room.

In that instant Sandy could hurl that ash tray. Ken stopped himself. No, Sandy wouldn't take the risk with Miss Harris only a yard from the muzzle of Bascom's gun. He wouldn't dare-not unless something happened to distract Bascom's attention from the secretary for a split second.

The vase of flowers on the small table beside Ken's chair seemed to catch his eye and beckon to him. He moved instantly. A swift sideways thrust of his foot jarred the table hard enough to send the vase toppling with a crash.

Bascom moved almost as quickly, pushing Gloria Harris roughly out of the way with his free hand so that his eyes once more commanded the entire room. But it was too late. The heavy glass ash tray was already skimming toward him like a discus.

Three things happened then at once, so swiftly that Ken wasn't exactly sure of what he did see.

Pop's long arm circled Gloria Harris, pulled her toward him, and then behind his own towering figure.

The ash tray struck Bascom hard on the left shoulder, spinning him in a half turn.

The plump figure of Andy Kane moved with fantastic speed and smoothness. A single chop sent the automatic out of Bascom's hand. Another caught the man across the throat. Gasping for breath, Bascom slumped to his knees, with his face to the wall. A second later his wrists were shackled together.

The milling confusion in the room subsided slowly. When Kane was ready to leave with his charge-a man now sullen and silent-the hubbub was still loud enough so that the police officer had to raise his voice to make himself heard.

"I assume," he said loudly, "I can count on all of you to make statements about the confession you heard here this morning."

Response to the request was unanimous. The men who had worked with Bascom could hardly bring themselves to look at him yet, but there was no doubt as to how they felt about his treachery.

"And I can count on you, Mr. Jennings," Bert said suddenly, "to give me an interview about your efforts to hand this plant over to Alborn, and the fact that you sold out your stock when you thought it would soon be worthless. This isn't for the anniversary edition," Bert added. "We want to get this out right away-before the Chamber of Commerce election."

"You print anything like that and I'll sue you!" Jennings shouted.

"Go right ahead," Pop told him cheerfully. "Or, if you prefer, we'll print a denial from you right alongside Bert's interview, and let the people of Brentwood decide the truth for themselves."

Jennings was making blindly for the door when Gloria Harris spoke. Now that the danger was past she was trembling. "Of course I'll make a statement," she said. "But you have everything you need, don't you-with the fingerprint on Ken's buckle, I mean?"

Chief Kane looked directly at Ken. "You've done a lot of fancy talking this morning," he said with a grin. "Suppose you answer Miss Harris' question."

Ken gulped. All eyes in the room had suddenly turned toward him. "Well, you see," he said, "that fingerprint-well, it really was on the belt buckle once. I saw it. But I'm afraid it got rubbed off when the belt was being unfastened, at the time-" Bascom made a lunge at him, his face livid. The pull of the cuffs in Kane's powerful grip and half a dozen outthrust hands stopped Bascom dead.

Sandy grinned over the camera he had whipped out the moment Bascom had been shackled. "Fine! That's the kind of picture that increases my reputation at Global News."

"You're working for me," Pop reminded him. "The *Brentwood Advance*, remember? You too," he said, looking at Ken. "I suggest that

we Allens and you, Ken, clear out of here right now. These folks have got a lot of things to straighten out, and we've got work to do."

Then Collins was beside them, one arm over Sandy's shoulders, one over Ken's. "I won't try to thank you now," he said quietly. "But sometime--"

Ken yawned, accumulated fatigue suddenly taking command of his sore and weary body. "We'll expect you to thank us by inviting us to cover your next Halloween party, sir," he said. "There's nothing like an office party for--" he yawned again, even wider--"for a nice peaceful assignment."

But the Brentwood Foundry and Casting Company didn't wait until the next Halloween to hold a party. And Ken and Sandy were guests of honor at the gain affair which celebrated the first successful castings turned out by the new machine four weeks later.

That particular event had no tragic aftermath, no grim midnight disclosure in the Allen kitchen. Brentwood had returned to the peacefulness that always seemed natural to its tree-shaded streets.

But Ken and Sandy themselves didn't remain peaceful for long--not when they found themselves involved in the strange affair that came to be known as *The Mystery of Gallows Cliff*.

THE END

THE MYSTERY OF THE INVISIBLE ENEMY

A KEN HOLT Mystery, No. 14

By Bruce Campbell